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## Ways of belonging: 'I belong with the lame ducks' (and lesbian cows) Suniti Namjoshi's The conversations of cow

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Ways of Belonging: 'I Belong With The Lane Ducks' (And Lesbian Cows); Suniti Namjoshi's *The Conversations Of Cow*

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Master of Arts (Honours) in Post-Colonial Literature

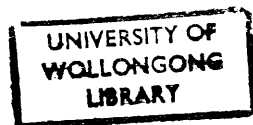
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The University of Wollongong

by

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Department of English  
1996



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Dr. Paul Sharrad- I can't thank you enough for your patience and kindness.

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines representations of ‘otherness’ in Suniti Namjoshi’s novel, *The Conversations of Cow*. It maps out how Namjoshi continually locates and foregrounds ‘difference’ on a multiplicity of levels, such as ‘race’, gender, sexual desire and sexuality. It posits that among Namjoshi’s central concerns are the actual processes of ‘othering’ and marginalisation; that is, the various overt and covert ways in which dominant cultures/discourses create, maintain and perpetuate racist, patriarchal, heterosexist/homophobic ideologies.

This dissertation also examines how, through the dialogues that the characters engage in, Namjoshi’s text explores ways in which minoritised ‘others’ engage with these discourses- how they can strategically negotiate and subvert them, and create critical and conceptual spaces for their voices to be heard. It concludes that finding ways of belonging is indeed different from ‘fitting in’, or being made to ‘fit in’.

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## I. Introduction

‘Instead of seeing my Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration (or worse, a “visible” disfigurement to be hidden), I see it now as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated.’ - Bharati Mukherjee.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bharati Mukherjee, *Darkness*, (London: Penguin, 1975), Introduction, p. 3.

To be a woman, a lesbian, a woman of colour and a migrant is to be minoritised many times over. Patriarchal discourses have traditionally constructed lesbians as monsters and grotesque aberrations.<sup>2</sup> A lesbian is not a 'real' woman within patriarchal constructs. She is a disrupter of heterosexist gender dualism and the ideologically encoded conventions of patriarchy. She is threatening because she challenges the hegemony of the 'normal' and the 'ideal' in relation to the nature of society, family, man-woman relationships and the universality of heterosexuality. An immigrant lesbian of colour is even further marginalised, not only in a white, heterosexual, patriarchal paradigm- 'where all sexualities, all bodies, and all "others" are bonded to an ideal/ideological hierarchy of males'<sup>3</sup>- but also by the perpetuation of racist ideologies within Anglo lesbian communities.

Suniti Namjoshi is an Indian lesbian-feminist author, who articulates through her work, the fraught issues that arise from having to inhabit all these subjectivities. To critique her world from that extreme margin is to wrestle with contradictions and paradoxes surrounding issues of identity and self-hood, of self-representation and agency. However, this does not mean that:

the woman herself is merely a passive recipient of an identity created by these forces. Rather she herself is part of the historicised, fluid movement, and she therefore actively

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<sup>2</sup> Patricia White, 'Female Spectator, Lesbian Specter', in Beatriz Colomina (ed.), *Sexuality and Space*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, 'Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation', in Henry Abelove et al (eds.), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 144.

contributes to the context within which her position can be delineated.....[thus the position of a woman] can be actively utilised as a location for the construction of meaning, a place from where meaning is constructed, rather than simply a place where meaning can be *discovered*.

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Namjoshi self-consciously foregrounds these issues in her writing, and I will attempt to show that the concept of positionality is central to Namjoshi's work. Her characters implicitly or explicitly map out how identity is not an ontological 'given', but is a kaleidoscopic construct, constantly reproduced by the intersection of socio-cultural, historical-political forces, and the subject's conscious creation of self.

Namjoshi interrogates constructs of subject-positionality, representation, self-representation, and agency. She also unpacks stereotypes of race, sexuality and gender and the dominant majority's collusion in producing these. By examining the sites at which these discourses intersect and by deconstructing the 'meaning' they ascribe, she opens up a 'third space'<sup>5</sup> in R. Radhakrishnan's terms- where oppressed and silenced minorities can not only speak, but be heard; that is, by locating the stereotype as an 'ambivalent mode of power and knowledge, a paradoxical mode of representation',<sup>6</sup> she disrupts

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<sup>4</sup> Erin G. Carlston, 'Zami and the Politics of Plural Identity', in Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope (eds.), *Sexual Practice, Textual Theory: Lesbian Cultural Criticism*, (Cambridge, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), p. 236. Carlston quotes Alcoff's concept of positionality. Though the analysis is about gender, it can be applied to Namjoshi's tactics in relation to her negotiations of dominant discourses of 'race' and sexuality.

<sup>5</sup> R. Radhakrishnan, 'Postcoloniality And The Boundaries Of Identity', in *Callaloo*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1993, p. 755.

<sup>6</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'The Other Question...', in *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 6, Nov-Dec 1983, p. 18.



racist/patriarchal pre-coding of the 'other' as both 'known' and 'lack'. Namjoshi's work demonstrates that the split project of colonial discourse and the 'marking of'/split in the colonial subject allow for slippages, that is, (sub)versions and (re)writings of 'reality'. These themes and politics are central to Namjoshi's challenging and complex body of work, thus positioning it within postcolonial/feminist debate.

I will argue that Namjoshi examines representations of 'otherness'<sup>7</sup> in her poetry and prose, and continually locates and foregrounds 'difference' on a multiplicity of levels, such as 'race', gender, sexual desire and sexuality. Among Namjoshi's central concerns are the actual processes of 'othering' and marginalisation; that is, the various overt and covert ways in which dominant cultures/discourses create, maintain and perpetuate racist, patriarchal, heterosexist/homophobic ideologies. The author explores ways in which minoritised 'others' engage with these discourses- how they strategically negotiate and subvert them, and create critical and conceptual spaces for their voices to be heard. Radhakrishnan argues that there is a difference between metropolitan hybridity and postcolonial hybridity, in his analysis of these two sorts of hybridities. He reads postcolonial hybridity in Gramscian terms, and stresses that postcolonial hybridity does not have the 'guarantees' of 'authenticity' or identity posited by the (western) secular identity that underlies metropolitan hybridity. Rather, postcolonial hybridity involves a painful 'inventory of one's self'<sup>8</sup>; that is, the self must be excruciatingly

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> R. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 753.

produced to inhabit many discursive positions. This is seen in Namjoshi's work, and is her way of articulating her subject positionality and identity without claims to 'authenticity'.

postcolonial hybridity is in a frustrating search for constituency and a legitimate political identity. It is important to the postcolonial hybrid to compile a laborious "inventory of one's self" and, on the basis of that complex genealogical process, produce her own version of hybridity and find political legitimacy for that version. I say this in a Gramscian vein to insist on a fundamental difference between hybridity as a comfortably given state of being and hybridity as an excruciating act of self-production by multiple traces.

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One sees this in relation to Namjoshi's articulation of her politics. Hybridity is never a comfortable 'given'; hence there are in her work, deliberate contradictions and provocative position statements on patriarchy, lesbian identity, feminist theory and 'Indianness'. Through a foregrounding of split subjectivities and selves, she is able to to theorise/make visible/legitimise the hybrid self through subversions of institutionalised and systemic erasures.

One sees in her work the attempt to articulate and (re)define notions of 'community' and 'the specificity of parameters of solidarity'<sup>10</sup>. Namjoshi's writing demonstrates that finding ways of belonging is indeed different from 'fitting in', or being made to 'fit in'. Her position is further decentred by the fact that she is an Indian writing in English in Canada; that

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 760.

is, a writer of the Indian diaspora. It is from this space on the margins that Namjoshi articulates her radical, eccentric world-view.

Though her work explores issues that are raised by contemporary debates about gender, identity, race, sexuality, representation and self-representation, her work is not didactic or of the 'tub-thumping' variety, as Diane McGifford points out:

Namjoshi works through indirection and innuendo, spices her poems with wit and humour, and roots them in specific circumstances- the classical, the literary, the everyday.

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Armed with an enduring suspicion of the human race, and an identification with animals, Namjoshi takes upon herself the task of deconstructing and subverting essentialised traditions and stereotypes through her fables, tales, poetry and novels. *Feminist Fables*,<sup>12</sup> *The Conversations of Cow*,<sup>13</sup> and *The Blue Donkey Fables*<sup>14</sup> offer alternate realities and different ways of being to those endorsed by Western Humanism. Namjoshi's animals expose the gendered violence and patriarchal morality of traditional fables, thus 'her lessons usurp the status quo to

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<sup>11</sup> Diane McGifford, 'Suniti Namjoshi (1941- )', in Emmanuel S. Nelson (ed.), *Writers of the Indian Diaspora: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 294.

<sup>12</sup> Suniti Namjoshi, *Feminist Fables*, (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1993). All quotations from this text are from this edition. First published by Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1981.

<sup>13</sup> S. Namjoshi, *The Conversations of Cow*, (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1985). All quotations from this text are indicated by page numbers in parentheses, and are from this edition.

<sup>14</sup> S. Namjoshi, *The Blue Donkey Fables and The Mothers of Maya Diip*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1991). All quotations from these texts are from this edition. First published separately by The Women's Press Ltd, 1988 and 1989.

Namjoshi's lesbian-feminist politics means that it is difficult to analyse separately the public, the private, the artistic and the theoretical in her writing. She deliberately chooses not to be a 'poet of impersonality', as Diane McGifford puts it-

For Namjoshi's's art, this policy- the rejection of impersonality and the integration of her various selves into her work- is a sound one since it has given birth to a genuine poetic voice. <sup>16</sup>

Absurdities abound in Namjoshi's work in all their luxuriant pluralities. The irrational, the obscurantist, the fantastic, the symbolical, collide with the pseudo-logical, over-systematised hierarchies of a racist, sexist, heterosexist western society. I will attempt to show that paradox and contradiction are deliberate discursive strategies, used by the author to provoke readers into making a critical and political response. The result is a transgressive, thought-provoking body of work that resonates with intertextual echoes from different cultural spectrums; a political body of work that aims at locating and foregrounding 'difference' on multiple levels, as well as 'deconstructing'<sup>17</sup> hierarchies of power predicated on white, male, heterosexual supremacy.

The 1960s and 1970s feminist and gay liberation

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<sup>15</sup> D. McGifford, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>17</sup> A term coined by Meeta Chatterjee in her Ph.D-in-progress, English Department, University of Wollongong. Used with her permission.

movements inspired a distinct body of separatist utopian novels,<sup>18</sup> giving fictional realisation to 'woman-identified' all-female societies. The emphasis was on the journey towards self-realisation and total identification with other women- a solidarity which would eventually overturn phallogentric society and establish a Lesbian Nation.

Lesbians look beyond individual relationships to female communities that do not need or want men..... much lesbian reading and writing quite explicitly excludes men (except perhaps as a symbol of danger)..... In actual patriarchal societies men are represented as essential for survival, even for making the world meaningful. It is therefore simply impossible for women and lesbians to avoid seeing and interacting with men in some way. But in a literary text- the lesbian utopia- writers and readers imagine possibilities that do not actually exist....<sup>19</sup>

Separatism was seen not only as a strategy, but a viable solution to overcome the problems of male hegemony and oppression. For example, *The Female Man*<sup>20</sup> and *The Wanderground*<sup>21</sup>, depict explicitly lesbian societies. In these utopias, men either do not exist, or live in completely separate spaces.<sup>22</sup> Men are, by definition, patriarchal and destructive,

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<sup>18</sup> Diane Griffin Crowder, 'Separatism and Feminist Utopian Fiction', in Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope (eds.), *Sexual Practice, Textual Theory: Lesbian Cultural Criticism*, (Cambridge, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), p. 237.

<sup>19</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, 'Perverse Reading', in *Sexual Practice, Textual Theory*, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

<sup>20</sup> Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*, (New York: Bantam, 1975).

<sup>21</sup> Sally Miller Gearhart, *The Wanderground*, (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1979).

<sup>22</sup> D. Griffin Crowder, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

and hence cannot be allowed to enter female utopia. Though there is a group of non-violent, pro-feminist men called the 'Gentles' in Gearhart's novel, they are constructed as, and always remain 'other'- 'Men and women are almost different species.'<sup>23</sup> These works are important in the sense that they opened up a critical space in which issues of gender and sexuality (especially lesbianism), could be explored in new ways- 'a conceptual, representational, erotic space.... in which women could address themselves to women'.<sup>24</sup>

Myths became integral to this lesbian-feminist ideology, but Western mythologies were seen as celebrations of patriarchy, phallocentrism and the status quo; hence there was a growing emphasis on pre-oedipal, non-western symbols and images of femaleness. Namjoshi's articulation of separatism in her earlier work, such as *The Conversations of Cow*, means that these works could be read as being a part and product of this lesbian-feminist ideology. Her 'dykonstructions' serve to demonstrate that the personal is, indeed, the political. Her work is made even more challenging to read by its focus on how ethnicity intersects with lesbian-feminism, and by its interrogation of a monolithic Indian identity.

I have chosen to study Namjoshi's work in this dissertation because of this author's complex examination and articulation of subjectivity and difference. I have focused on *The Conversations of Cow* in terms of a close textual analysis, because it is an interesting and difficult text to unpack. As I

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>24</sup> T. de Lauretis, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

have suggested later on, it opens up a multiplicity of reading positions, and can be read as being problematic in its seeming endorsement of a biologically essentialised separatist politics, and in the way it posits 'Indianness' in relation to both Suniti and Bhadravati. But in my opinion, Namjoshi deliberately mobilises discourses of strategic essentialism in order to foreground the construction of stereotypes and subvert them, and also to provoke readers into making a critical response. I have sometimes used unconventional sources to launch my arguments and to support my assertions. This is because of the limited text-related commentary available and also because I wish to foreground my reading process and position in relation to her work.

Namjoshi's *The Conversations of Cow* is a multifaceted novel which explores subjectivity, difference and 'otherness'<sup>25</sup> - of colour, of gender, of sexuality, of being- on a multiplicity of levels. The novel is set in Canada of the nineteen-eighties, and has as its protagonists, Suniti<sup>26</sup>, an Indian-lesbian-feminist-English professor, and Bhadravati, a Brahmini lesbian cow, goddess of 'a thousand shapes and a thousand wishes'. (p. 122).

Namjoshi with a sharp wit explores the creativity and subjectivities of an immigrant, lesbian, feminist, separatist through the dialogue between Suniti and Bhadravati; hence creating conceptual spaces that illustrate Suniti's problematic positionality and the socio-cultural forces that impact upon it:

'Just because I'm a woman and a foreigner, it does not follow I

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<sup>25</sup> H. Bhabha, 'The Other Question', *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> I will refer to the author as Namjoshi, and the character as Suniti so as to avoid confusion.

cannot be a university professor.'

'And a lesbian,' B adds, looking mischievous. 'But really,' she goes on, 'English Literature?'

'Onlookers,' I tell her loftily, 'often see more than participants.' (p. 34).

Namjoshi attempts to speak for herself, but does so through the use of allegory and fable, and hence elides the fraught issue of 'authenticity'. But the author still engages in a political act by inhabiting the subject position(s) of a Canadian- Indian lesbian woman who has been minoritised and marginalised by both, the dominant white, heterosexual paradigm, as well as the Anglo lesbian one. Thus though Spivak reads the subaltern subject as unrepresentable because its narrative is marked by 'eternal deferral'<sup>27</sup>, Namjoshi's approach to 'authenticity' and self-representation can be read in Radhakrishnan's terms:

What I mean by 'authenticity' here is that critical search for a third space that is complicitious neither with the deracinating imperatives of westernisation nor with theories of a static, natural and singleminded autochthony. The authenticity I have in mind here is an invention with enough room for multiple-rootedness; in other words, there need be no theoretical or epistemological opposition between authenticity and historical contingency, between authenticity and hybridity, between authenticity and invention. <sup>28</sup>

The novel's disruptiveness, humour and poignancy arise

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<sup>27</sup> R. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 759.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 755.



from the disjunctions between Suniti's ways of being and seeing, Bhadravati's Goddess/lesbian/cow perceptions,<sup>29</sup> and those of the predominantly white, human/cow world they both must function in. Cow is also given a didactic role- she must lecture to the professor, in a sense, guide her, and often be her conscience. As Suniti realises much later in the novel:

'The watch-dog, a poodle or a puppy, or even a cow, but functioning always as a guardian or a lackey, a self-appointed porter, and always with the same question, "Is this thing good or bad for me?"' (p. 85).

The disruptiveness and humour also lie in the style of Namjoshi's writing itself. As Patricia Duncker succinctly describes it:

Namjoshi's central writing work is poetry, and her fables read like prose poems: sharp-toothed, condensed, story-telling pared down to its essence. Paradoxical, prickly, ironic, her stories read like a sequence of stilettos.

30

Namjoshi's writing is dry, understated, witty, and plays word games with readers. The juxtaposition of absurd situations with a sly, subtle, self-reflexive irony in the dialogue, makes the novel comic and occasionally disturbing, as seen in the dinner party incident, which I have discussed in greater detail later on.

Namjoshi makes use of both Western and Eastern mythology for her themes, narratives, and characters. For example, in *Feminist Fables*, she has done feminist/ lesbian-

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<sup>29</sup> Patricia Duncker, *Sisters and Strangers: An Introduction to Contemporary Feminist Fiction*, (Oxford, UK & Cambridge, USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), p. 161.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

feminist rewriting's of both *Aesop's Fables*, Greek and Roman mythology, fairy-tales, as well as stories from the *Panchatantra*. This is seen clearly in 'Case History', which is a reworking of 'Little Red Riding Hood.'

After the event Little R. traumatised. Wolf not slain. Forester is wolf..... Grandmother dead..... Wolf marries mother..... Please to see shrink. Shrink will make it clear that wolves on the whole are extremely nice....<sup>31</sup>

'Wolf' signifies the danger of patriarchy; that is to say, the power of patriarchal discourse to silence and disempower its 'others'. The lesson here is- all men are patriarchal. There is no distinction made between 'good' male figures and 'bad/predatory' male figures, because all men are wolves. Namjoshi also comments on the politics of patriarchal incorporation by having the mother marry the forester/wolf- thus the mother becomes the wolf's, rather than R's ally. The message Little R. gets is that it is better to be a wolf, because grandmothers (feminists/lesbians) get killed. The Shrink represents institutional effacement of difference operating through the discourse of psychiatry- R. must be 'normalised' into seeing patriarchy as natural and desirable.

In a similar vein we get a rewriting of 'Beauty and the Beast', which maps out the damage done by heterosexism and homophobia:

The Beast was a woman. That's why its love for Beauty was so monstrous....'The only story that fits me at all is the one about

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<sup>31</sup> S. Namjoshi, *Feminist Fables*, op. cit., p. 3.

the Beast. But the Beast doesn't change from a Beast to a human because of its love. It's just the reverse....'

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Thus, the Beast is not a bewitched prince, it is a lesbian demonised by prejudice and intolerance. Here Namjoshi subverts the trope of 'lesbian as monster' by exposing how phallogentric and heterosexist economies collude to pathologise alternative sexualities. The issue of lesbian invisibility, which resurfaces in *The Conversations Of Cow*, is broached in this piece. In the cultural/literary discourses produced within the above-mentioned economies, the Beast is denied access to positive images of self-identification with which to validate same-sex love. Daphne gets turned into a green laurel even after she submits to Apollo<sup>33</sup>; the Princess feels not only the pea, but is allergic to everything, and dies.<sup>34</sup> The lesson is that women who do not interrogate patriarchal constructs of femininity and sexuality- ('princess', 'nymph')- are dehumanised and silenced, metaphorically or literally.

'Man is at the centre. There are no human women.'<sup>35</sup> This is a theme that is reiterated in much of Namjoshi's work, including *The Conversations of Cow*. But Namjoshi simultaneously posits the possibility for women to become 'woman-identified' and subvert the constructs and constraints of patriarchy. For example, we see that 'In the Forest',<sup>36</sup> the witch in 'Hansel and Gretel' is depicted as a source of comfort rather than terror to Gretel; and Sheherazade from 'The Thousand and

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>33</sup> 'Nymph', *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> 'The Princess', *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> 'Exegesis', *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

One Nights' refuses the Caliph's offer of marriage and prefers to stay with her sister Dinarzade. The latter story is in fact titled 'For Adrienne Rich- If She Would Like It',<sup>37</sup> which suggests that Namjoshi has consciously based her tale on Adrienne Rich's concept of a 'lesbian continuum', which Rich defines as:

a range..... of woman-identified experience; not simply [the desire for] genital sexual experience with another woman..... [but] forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support. <sup>38</sup>

Thus for Namjoshi, this notion of the primacy of women's relationships with other women (whether sexual or otherwise), has great subversive potential. She uses it strategically in order to foreground the sexual politics and misogyny in traditional fables and myths, and disrupts their heterosexual imperative and patriarchal closure; thus opening up spaces in which she inscribes her resistance to stable genres and essentialised traditions. But Namjoshi is also critical of unqualified celebrations of 'sisterhood'. This concern surfaces in her exploration of racism within Anglo lesbian communities in *The Conversations of Cow*, and in her mapping of the power struggles between women in *The Mothers of Maya Diip*, which I discuss further in Chapters 3 and 4.

One day Parrot said to Tortoise, 'I say, let's make the world.'

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>38</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', in *Signs*, Vol. 5, no. 4, 1980, p. 648.

..... For a moment or two they contemplated the world they had agreed upon. 'I say,' said Tortoise, breaking the silence, 'do we have to have people?' 'No,' replied Parrot. 'Phew,' said Tortoise. And they lived happily ever after.<sup>39</sup>

As can be seen in the above fable, Namjoshi reiterates a suspicion of the human race, which is linked to her fascination with metamorphoses and talking animals. Her work has been described as 'modern parables addressing the contradictions of Lesbian and feminist theory [where] the sexual debates within feminism are distanced by the metamorphosis into animals.....',<sup>40</sup> For example, the protagonist of *The Blue Donkey Fables* is a lesbian-feminist Donkey whose 'blueness' becomes the site of many debates:

One party said that donkeys never had been and never would be white and what was asked of the donkey was grossly unfair. If, on the other hand, donkeys were required to be a non-descript grey.... they would be prepared to accept the solution.... But the opposing party found a fault in their logic. 'Just because donkeys have never been known to be white.... it does not follow that a donkey is incapable of achieving whiteness. Your argument imposes an arbitrary limitation on the creature's potential.'

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Thus Namjoshi displaces the sign 'lesbian'/'racial other' on the sign 'blue'. The word 'blue' then functions to signify 'difference', becoming a site for the unpacking of biological essentialist

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<sup>39</sup> S. Namjoshi, 'The Creation: Plan B', in *The Blue Donkey Fables*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>40</sup> P. Duncker, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>41</sup> S. Namjoshi, 'The Blue Donkey', in *The Blue Donkey Fables*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

theories, as well as 'progressive' liberal discourses. (This is a textual strategy Namjoshi uses effectively in *The Conversations Of Cow-* I discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 3). The implicit question is: why should the donkey aspire to being white or be required to be grey? Thus this is a comment on assimilationist practices by dominant cultures. This can also be read as a critique of colonialist discourses, which on one hand, stated that the 'Native' could be changed/'civilised' through education and Christianity, but on the other, constructed a 'Native mind' that was innately limited and inferior, and hence, unchangeable. This also ties in with Bhabha's notion of fixity and repetition being central to constructions of the stereotype, and in a sense is an articulation of the disavowal/desire model he maps out- 'the colonised as a fixed reality which is at once an "other" and yet entirely knowable and visible'. <sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> H. Bhabha, 'The Other Question', *op. cit.*, p. 23.

## II. Fragmented Subjectivities and Shifting Selves

Because the world seemed flat and fallen/she conjured  
the creatures she had invented:/the one-eyed  
monkeys, the shape-changing donkeys/and birds of  
divers sorts who hitherto/had flown at fancy's behest.  
'Wherein lies/ wisdom?' she asked each of them. 'In  
playing,'/ laughed one. 'In silence,' said another. 'In/  
purposefully striving,' offered a third./ And seeing she  
was vexed, they went away again- Suniti. <sup>43</sup>

'I am a 50-year-old woman. I am supposed to be a poet.  
What am I doing?'- Namjoshi. <sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> S. Namjoshi, *Saint Suniti and The Dragon and Other Fables*, (London: Virago Press, 1994), p. 29.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

## A. Negotiating the Many Selves.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her reflections on being a 'Third World', feminist, Marxist academic in the USA, states that:

In a certain sense, I think there is nothing that is central. The centre is always constituted in terms of its own marginality. However, having said that, in terms of the hegemonic historical narrative, certain peoples have always been asked to cathect the margins so others can be defined as central. Negotiating between these two structures, sometimes I have to see myself as the marginal in the eyes of others.

45

One can say that Suniti is made to 'cathect the margins' because of her positionality. In negotiating her subjectivity Suniti has to juggle many different roles and positions such as writer, lesbian, woman in the process of spiritual transformation, 'ethnic'<sup>46</sup>, friend, lover, confidante, and sometimes, hopeless romantic and/or cynic. I deliberately use the term romantic and/or cynic, because as the following passage indicates, a flip sort of cynicism often serves to disguise Suniti's thwarted romantic visions, and the pain she experiences because of her self-imposed split of intellect and emotion. For instance, Suniti

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<sup>45</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Strategy, Identity, Writing', in Sarah Harasym (ed.), *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 40-41.

<sup>46</sup> See Joseph Pugliese, 'Language and Minorities', in Shirley Fitzgerald and Garry Wotherspoon (eds.), *Minorities*, (Sydney: State Library of NSW Press, 1995), p. 197. Pugliese maps out how 'one only ever *becomes* an ethnic', that is; how non-Anglo minorities are discursively produced as ethnics due to the complex and intersecting ideological and socio-political 'forces which dramatise the nexus between knowledge and power.'



has:

‘A dream. A realistic dream. World peace. Non-discrimination  
Against Lesbians. Vegetarianism. That sort of thing.’

B is annoyed. ‘Do you think that’s funny?’

‘No, I apologise. It was- it was almost a kind of despair. What is  
needed is a kind of transformation.’

‘Well, what about something more specific,’ I venture, ‘for  
instance, the single-minded pursuit of personal happiness?’

(p. 37).

Suniti must continually negotiate the strictures placed upon her  
by a white, patriarchal, heterosexist society. This often is a  
draining, exhausting experience that erodes at both, her sense  
of self, and her many different selves. As Audre Lorde says  
about her own negotiation of selves:

Being women together was not enough. We were different...  
Being Black together was not enough. We were different.  
Being Black women together was not enough. We were  
different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We  
were different..... we could not afford to settle for one easy  
definition, one narrow individuation of self.

47

But Suniti/Namjoshi’s financial stability, her Hindu roots and  
her strongly lesbian- feminist politics also means that she has  
the resources to engage in intellectual activity, to experiment  
with spiritual and political alchemy, to actively mobilise each  
struggle as a site of contestation and reflection. Her attempt at

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<sup>47</sup> Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, (Trumansburg, N.Y:  
Crossing Press, 1984), p. 226.

articulating and validating her selves can be read as being similar to what Spivak says:

I have always felt that one should speak personally. Yes, that one should think of oneself as a public individual, so that it's not like every bit of your confessional history, but it's trying to think of the representative space which you occupy. But now I feel that I can talk about that representative space with more authority because I have been around.... where people can really check me out rather than think of me as piece of exotica. <sup>48</sup>

The novel foregrounds the notion that individuals are a constantly changing and shifting melange of selves and identities, though we like to think that we have fixed and sharply defined identities, that we are coherent, 'normal' and unified beings. Suniti's negotiations also raise the question of representation and self-representation- (who speaks? or is allowed to speak? who listens?) This, then, becomes the most challenging part of reading such a text, for, as Spivak points out:

On one hand, we cannot put it under the carpet with demands for authentic voices; we have to remind ourselves that, as we do this, we might be compounding the problem even as we are trying to solve it... <sup>49</sup>

Thus Suniti's psychological and spiritual journey, her process of constructing self, and self-discovery is one filled with clash,

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<sup>48</sup> G. C. Spivak, 'Postmarked Calcutta, India', in *The Post-Colonial Critic*, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>49</sup> G. C. Spivak, 'Questions of Multiculturalism', in *The Post-Colonial Critic*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

contradiction and reversal rather than a smooth continuity. As Patricia Duncker puts it:

Feminist writing will always be oppositional. Thus, even the process of making the self that writes, the very process of constructing our different selves is an embattled, oppositional struggle. <sup>50</sup>

## **B. 'What Does It Mean That I Write As A Lesbian?'**

This analysis applies to lesbian-feminist writing, and even more so to lesbian-feminist writing by women of colour. Alice Hennegan defines a lesbian novel as:

A lesbian novel for me has become one in which a lesbian author's experience and necessarily oblique vision of the world (which continues to marginalise her) informs her work, regardless of the gender or sexuality of her characters. <sup>51</sup>

This analysis is quite problematic, as Duncker points out; and I agree with Duncker's analysis, in the sense that Hennegan seems to have made up her mind that lesbian authors will always inhabit 'oblique and marginal' positions, and hence, will always be disempowered. <sup>52</sup>

While Anna Wilson, speaking from a clearer positionality, and much more passionately, says in her essay, 'On Being A Lesbian

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<sup>50</sup> P. Duncker, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in P. Duncker, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

Writer':

And yet, I remain other than Woman; there remains a distinction between what the world expects of a woman's view- and what I see.... If it seems important to retain my sense of difference, to guard the oblique angle from which I see the world, what does it mean that I write as a lesbian?

53

Thus we can see that 'difference', an 'oblique' vision, and marginalisation that arises from these are mentioned as key factors in both analyses. The 'embattled, oppositional struggle' to use P. Duncker's term, is intensified many-fold when a woman is minoritised three times over- for being a woman in a patriarchal society, for being a lesbian in a heterosexist/homophobic society, and for being a 'racial other'/ethnic/migrant in a predominantly white society. The fraught issues of invisibility/visibility, assimilation, and resistance become even more tangled for immigrant lesbian writers.<sup>54</sup> As C. Dunsford and S. Hawthorne put it:

For some, it is not so much the capturing of past traditions, but about inventing a language sensitive to 'transitions and emotional landscape, and its relation to dreams.'

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Similarly, Namjoshi raises difficult questions that are primarily addressed to lesbian-feminist women, such as: how do we reconcile the relationships between minority traditions and those of the dominant majorities? How do we create a language

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>54</sup> Cathie Dunsford and Susan Hawthorne (eds.), *The Exploding Frangipani*, (Auckland: The New Women's Press, 1990), Introduction, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10 .

that exists for us and our concerns? After all, language constitutes reality, it cannot exist outside cultural and historical specificities;<sup>56</sup> therefore one must agree with Duncker's statement that:

All systems, languages, psychological structures, are heavily pre-coded with meanings that we did not independently create, and which we cannot always control. 57

But no group is entirely powerless<sup>58</sup>, and language can be appropriated in its various registers by minority groups, deaccentuated and reaccentuated, and hence used by a minority group in a subversive and self-empowering way.<sup>59</sup> Marginalisation and 'otherness' itself can be used by minority groups as a site of intervention, in order to empower themselves in terms of self-representation. As H. Bhabha argues in his analysis of communities of the modern nation-state:

If, in our travelling theory, we are alive to the *metaphoricity* of the peoples of imagined communities- migrant or metropolitan- then we shall find that the space of the modern nation-people is never simply horizontal. .... the people are the articulation of a doubling of the national address, an ambivalent *movement* between the discourses of pedagogy and the performative. 60

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<sup>56</sup> P. Duncker, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> For example, in *Conversations*, Suniti is a professor of English Literature. Though this issue is not directly addressed, this means that she would be invested with more power in a classroom situation, and in the institution of the University, in comparison to her students.

<sup>59</sup> J. Pugliese, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

<sup>60</sup> H. Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the

We see this in *The Conversations of Cow*, with its fluid movement between Suniti's 'reality' and dreams, between Cow's (corpo)reality and her various manifestations, which cross boundaries of the gendered body, sex, sexuality, and 'race'. Suniti and Cow are always 'journeying and crossing over new boundaries',<sup>61</sup> politically, spiritually, intellectually, sexually and emotionally; they experiment, they chafe at narrow definitions of existence and being, they resist being incorporated by dominant discourses. In fact, their dialogue, interaction and creativity brings to mind a line from one of Adrienne Rich's love poems: 'whatever we do together is pure invention.'<sup>62</sup> as well as the title of Kate Morris's poem: 'She is being born into herself.'<sup>63</sup> Suniti, who begins by wanting 'A drug, a dream, a facile perfection.' (p. 43) grows, so that she is able to accept an imperfect, but real happiness. To extend this analysis, it is precisely this marginality, this movement between the 'performative' and the 'pedagogical', that is the strength of lesbian-feminist writing. As B. Zimmerman contends:

"lesbian consciousness" is really a point of view, a view from the boundary. And in a sense every time a woman draws a circle around her psyche, saying "this is a room of *my own* " and then writes from within that "room", she's inhabiting lesbian consciousness.

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Modern Nation', in H. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 300.

<sup>61</sup> C. Dunsford and S. Hawthorne, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>62</sup> Adrienne Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New 1950-1984*, (New York: Norton, 1984), p. 242.

<sup>63</sup> Unpublished poem by Kate Morris, poetry portfolio for 2nd year, Bachelor of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, 1992. Used with her permission.

<sup>64</sup> B. Zimmerman, 'What Has Never Been', in *Sexual Practice, Textual Theory*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

Thus in the end, Suniti (and by implication, Namjoshi) empowers herself by writing from the boundary and writing as a lesbian.

### III. 'Inner Mythology and Hidden Paths'.

'Whether it is in our bodies or our minds; whether it is the way our work shapes us or we shape our relationships, what we attempt to do is create a map, a navigational tool that can help us explore our own inner mythology and hidden paths.'- Cathie Dunsford and Susan Hawthorne.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> C. Dunsford and S. Hawthorne, *op. cit.*, p. 10.



## A. Commentaries of Narrative.

Namjoshi delights in breaking down boundaries of genre within the narrative paradigm of *The Conversations of Cow*. There is a deliberate fluidity of genres which echoes the fluidity of Suniti and Bhadravati's transformations, and suggests that genre-bending is used as a discursive strategy with which to subvert Anglo/phallogentric realities, thus making the text a site which is capable of articulating minoritised/resistant positions. The use of a talking animal which functions as a catalyst and drives the action, is a choice evidently in favour of the fable form. But this is a narrative written from a self-consciously Indian lesbian-feminist perspective, with a deliberate foregrounding of its ideology. Therefore, what seems at first to be a light, 'transparent' narrative gradually reveals itself as a multi-accented, multi-layered one that raises and engages with fraught issues. The novel becomes, therefore, a literary archaeological site that invites readers to create and construct meaning- thus subverting the traditional fable's positing of gendered violence and patriarchal morality as 'objective' and 'universal' truth. This strategy illustrates Namjoshi's engagement with reader-positionality once again. Namjoshi explicitly states her desire to open up a dialogue with her readers in the following poem:

Dear Reader,

I have the power? I define? And I

control? But it takes two live bodies, one

writing and one reading, to generate a sky,

The fable is intertwined with science-fiction, romance, Hindu philosophy, absurdist farce, theories of subjectivity and difference, satire and feminist utopia, all of which are both, used and parodied. Thus the novel constantly defies expectations concerning genre fiction.

There are five sections in the novel; I: The Manifestation, II: Bhadravati, III: Interlude, IV: Bud and V: Conjuring Cow. Each of these sections is closely connected with Suniti's inner and outer journeys, and hence, there is room for ambiguity and paradox. Anne Cranny-Francis argues that

Feminist writers must engage with and contradict traditional narrative patterning in order to (re)construct texts capable of articulating marginalized, oppositional positions. 67

This analysis can be extended in relation to *The Conversations Of Cow*. The structure of Namjoshi's novel demonstrates, in fact, that the political and emotional concerns of a non-Anglo, lesbian, feminist do not fit into a linear, patriarchal, realist narrative. Both, content (reality, search for identity, articulating marginalised selves), as well as form (mixing novel, fantasy, science fiction-utopia, poetry and fable) point to an engagement with the development of a new lesbian-feminist art form.<sup>68</sup> Suniti's narrative is elliptical, and though it ends on a happy note it does not have closure imposed upon it, because the 'end'

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<sup>66</sup> S. Namjoshi, 'Dear Reader', in *The Blue Donkey Fables*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>67</sup> Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fictions*, (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1990), p. 15.

<sup>68</sup> D. McGifford, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

of the narrative is the beginning of Suniti's writing the narrative. In the intricate dance of woman and cow, neither Suniti nor Cow ever give or accept neat, tidy, easy answers. But Namjoshi's refusal of closure, paradox and contradiction never means a lack of focus. Difficulty is used in a deliberate, self-reflexive way, therefore 'is contained and explored within the form'.<sup>69</sup>

Throughout the novel, Suniti searches for spaces and discursive gaps, into which she can speak her voices so that she will be heard. As Spivak points out:

For me, the question 'Who will speak?' is less crucial than 'Who will listen?' 'I will speak for myself as a Third World person' is an important position for political mobilisation today. But the real demand is that, when I speak from that position, I should be listened to seriously, not with that kind of benevolent imperialism.....<sup>70</sup>

Suniti finds these gaps and spaces during the course of her conversations with Cow, in the process, validating the voices of many women through the ages who have recited or written their narratives, but who have been relegated to the periphery, marginalised for being part of a 'minority discourse'. Namjoshi-through Suniti, and Cow in her many manifestations- breaks many silences. The style of writing itself illustrates how the traditional, realist narrative effectively effaces many other forms of narratives/herstories, such as the thoughts and emotions of women 'othered' not only on the basis of gender,

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<sup>69</sup> P. Duncker, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>70</sup> G. C. Spivak, 'Questions of Multiculturalism', *op. cit.*, p. 60.

but also by virtue of 'racial' and sexual difference, which in turn impacts upon their positionality as women writers. Implicit in the way the novel is structured is the idea that the hegemonic/patriarchal/linear narrative does not have the spaces necessary to record, interrogate and celebrate the many different experiences of 'Third World' women's creativity and lives. As Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn point out:

Literature is a "discursive practice".... whose conventions encode social conventions and are ideologically complicit. Moreover, since each invocation of a code is also its reinforcement or reinscription, literature does more than transmit ideology: it actually creates it.....<sup>71</sup>

In the light of Greene and Kahn's analysis, the Anglo/patriarchal/linear narrative sets itself up as the 'proper' form, because its literary conventions encode social conventions of white, heterosexual, male, superiority. Thus, this narrative then becomes ideologically complicit in marginalising non-Anglo women's writing, and especially non-Anglo lesbian writing, because the latter is seen to be transgressing the 'proper' form of narrative. Then the invocation of the 'proper' not only reinscribes notions of the 'proper', but actually creates the European canon. Namjoshi strategically disrupts notions of the 'proper', through her position statements, her transgression of genre boundaries, and her stylistic experiments.

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<sup>71</sup> Quoted in P. Duncker, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

## B. Cow, Not Calliope.

Also embedded within *The Conversations of Cow* is the notion that most women draw upon their own lives and experiences for their creativity- Calliope or Erato do not appear from the heavens to shower inspiration on the white, male, solitary Creative Genius. In fact, Namjoshi plays interestingly with the literary convention of a heavenly Muse, through her introduction and treatment of Cow's character. Suniti thinks that Cow has appeared to her as a Goddess, the answer to her prayers, and Cow has done so, in a sense:

I'm down on my knees, waiting for the goddess to manifest herself. When I open my eyes, The Cow of a Thousand Wishes is standing before me on green turf. Daffodils and crocuses grow at her feet, though, incongruously enough, the cow herself is a Brahmini cow. (p. 13).

Thus the Goddess/Muse is a cow, and a Brahmin one at that. By simply juxtaposing these incongruities, Namjoshi creates a hybrid symbol. It brings together the literal and the fantastic, the bizarre and the banal, the divine and the bovine. In colloquial English usage, the adjective 'cow' functions in a derogatory sense to mean a large, slow-witted woman. In Hinduism, on the other hand, the cow is constructed as a Holy Mother whose every secretion is sacred.<sup>72</sup> Cow fits into neither the former nor the latter category,<sup>73</sup> thus patriarchal language

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<sup>72</sup> W. J. Wilkins, *Hindu Mythology: Vedic and Puranic*, (Calcutta, New Delhi, Allahabad, Bombay: Rupa & Co, 2nd edition, 1986), p. 339.

<sup>73</sup> Though Cow does operate on one level as 'Kamadhenu', the 'Cow of Plenty', yielder of all that is wished. This aspect is underscored at the end of the novel, in Suniti's invocation to Cow.

is subverted with the Hindu mythoscape. Again, contrary to literary conventions, the agent of inspiration and/or wish-fulfillment arrives before we know the nature of Suniti's quest. Cow is also a lesbian, as Suniti finds out soon after:

‘I ought to tell you,’ Cow informs me, ‘that this is a Self-Sustaining Community of Lesbian Cows.’ I scrutinise Cow. So, Cow and I have something in common. (pp. 17-18).

Also importantly, Cow is never a silent Muse, but an articulate, strongly opinionated one. Just as significantly- she is Suniti's guide and philosopher at one level, but she engages in a productive dialogue with Suniti, and hardly ever talks *at* her. Their relationship has echoes of the ancient Indian guru-shishya (teacher- student) tradition. Namjoshi uses (and parodies) a traditional and ancient Indian narrative form, that is, a dialogue between student and teacher. This form of narrative is filled with philosophical musings about the nature of the self, ‘Man’, ‘Woman’, and the universe. It is also usually dictated by the teacher to the student-scribe. The student plays the role of sounding-board, and rarely challenges the guru. For instance, Ganesha is said to have written the *Mahabharata* at the sage Vyasa's dictation.<sup>74</sup> But Namjoshi's text transgresses these traditions constantly, as both the teacher and student are not only female, but they are ‘out’ lesbians. Furthermore, the student is actually allowed the space to question, disbelieve, even talk back, which is subversive in itself, considering the submissive role usually expected of Indian women even today.

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<sup>74</sup> W. J. Wilkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-132, 331. Conversations with my grandmother have also been a helpful source of information and clarification.

Therefore Namjoshi uses the character of Cow to subvert both, western, and Indian traditions.

Thus the end of the book demonstrates an ironic self-reflexivity and an affectionate, teasing tone- both Suniti and Cow are aware of the roles that they are meant to have been playing. But they also know that the roles of teacher and student have often been reversed, and sometimes entirely discarded in the course of their journey; and hence, Suniti is much more than just Cow's faithful scribe, while Cow is more than Suniti's teacher. They have become close friends and lovers. Thus though the novel is titled *The Conversations of Cow*, which is appropriate when contextualised by the end, it consists of Suniti's conversations *with* Cow and with her many selves:

I smile at her. 'You know, I'm going to write down all this.

'What? "The Conversations of Cow" faithfully recorded by her scribe Suniti?' (p. 125).

### **C. Fitting In, Splitting Off.**

In the above passage we can also see that Namjoshi immediately raises issues of 'fitting in' and constructed cultural expectations. The question is not why should a cow appear out of the blue with daffodils and crocuses at her feet, but why should, and how could a *Brahmin* cow appear in this context? This introduction gradually leads to Suniti beginning to examine her own ways of belonging or not belonging, and of course,

walking on eggshells around questions of the personal, the political, and the politic:

‘How did you know I was an immigrant cow?’

How not to be personal? Or rather, how to be personal and politic as well?

‘I’m from India myself.’ I wonder if this constitutes a *non sequitur*.

‘Oh,’ says the cow. It evidently does. (p.14).

Yet, Cow is ordinary in some ways- she is stubborn and headstrong, she gets upset, hurt, angry, and can, on occasion, be insensitive. Though wise, she is also very human and fallible, and constantly challenges Suniti, by her very humanness, to push beyond the intellectual and emotional boundaries imposed by internalised and external social conventions:

‘Do be sensible.’

‘I am being.’

‘No, you’re being conventional.’ (p. 90).

There is a constant questioning, challenging, defining, re-defining of boundaries, socio-cultural conditioning and role-playing, as well as searching for answers right through the novel, especially when Bhadravati decides to ‘become’ a white man because she is tired of being economically disempowered and ‘exotic’. It is interesting to note that people’s reactions to Suniti and Bhadravati change dramatically as soon as they are perceived as being a heterosexual couple, Sue and Bud- even though tensions arise from what the dominant white majority sees as an ‘interracial’ relationship, and hence, still different:



As we're leaving the maitre d'hotel says, 'Bring her again.

She's beautiful.'

Bud looks smug. 'There, Suniti. Aren't you pleased?'

'No. If you went into a parking lot with a foreign car, it's exactly what the attendant might say to you.' (p. 105).

Hence Suniti must struggle against a society that makes her invisible, while simultaneously objectifying her body as an exotic commodity for white, male (or, considering the racism in Anglo lesbian communities- for white, female) use. As Bhabha contends:

The construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference- racial and sexual. Such an articulation becomes crucial if it held that the body is simultaneously inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination and power.

75

Even Suniti herself temporarily feels like an 'acceptable' woman, against her own good judgement. The implicit questions that are raised here are: who decides what form of behaviour or being is 'acceptable'? Who draws the line between 'them' and 'us'? Thus Namjoshi makes a succinct comment on the creation of minorities by dominant majorities<sup>76</sup>; how the majorities construct a singular, monolithic, 'acceptable' identity, where all

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<sup>75</sup> H. Bhabha, 'The Other Question', *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>76</sup> Also see J. Pugliese, *op. cit.*, p. 193. In his analysis of ethnic minorities, Pugliese says: 'What is this seemingly homogeneous other (majority) against which minorities emerge? The majority's very identity is staked out in the manoeuvres by which it defines its others, that is; any history of minorities also functions as a tacit history of aspects of a perceived majority.'

behaviour and bodies must be forced to fit into this ideological construct, or be 'othered':

It is only because married people and the bourgeois family are given such authority within a sexist/heterosexist culture, that Lesbians become nebulous unpersons. <sup>77</sup>

This could be applied to Suniti's search for coherence and identity, which is made all the more difficult because she is a minority within a minority, that is, a non-Anglo lesbian. Some lines in the novel suggest that sometimes Suniti does feel like a 'nebulous unperson'. Typically, Namjoshi carries this sense of alienation and disorientation from the self to its surreal extreme- Suniti wakes up one morning to find herself in bed with her. They think, feel and act in almost precisely the same ways, look identical, but have two separate bodies:

This constant contiguity is a nuisance. I know that S2 is worthwhile in herself, but I'm not altogether happy with this needless duplication. (p. 111).

Yet this manifestation, S2, is not just a replica or copy, but an actual second Suniti. S2 is a necessary step in Suniti's search for a legitimate identity- a process of discovering different aspects about herself and being able to articulate them towards achieving an inner peace. It is significant, therefore, that Suniti starts to experience a genuine empathy for S2:

I find I'm as stiff and tired as S2 herself. 'This is empathy,' I think. 'This is true fellow feeling. At last I am experiencing

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<sup>77</sup> P. Duncker, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

genuine compassion, but it's something on the whole I could do without.' (p. 115).

'Splitting off from oneself' takes on a whole new, rather unpleasant resonance here. The original Suniti is so distanced from herself that she can only think of herself as a character that she must play; she is simultaneously the inner critic, so that both Suniti and S2 watch each other/themselves playing each other/themselves, and judge the performance(s).<sup>78</sup> One particular passage illustrates this most clearly:

...I wake up. I don't know who I am. After a while I see S2 beside me sitting up in bed. Then I remember. I'm supposed to be Suniti, that particular person with those preoccupations. (pp. 120-121).

Getting in touch with oneself is often painful, as Suniti discovers; sometimes it is easier to remain 'stuck' in one's head and disassociate from one's feelings. This also ties in with Radhakrishnan's analysis of postcolonial hybrid identity as excruciatingly produced through multiple traces, which I have discussed in the introduction.

This 'splitting' can also be read in terms of Bhabha's formulation of the construction of 'otherness' in colonial discourse. This form of discourse functions by recognising difference, whether racial, cultural or sexual, and

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<sup>78</sup> I would say that Namjoshi is also playing with post-modern notions of the 'real' and the 'fictional'. Is S2 a creation of Suniti's imagination, just as Suniti is a creation of Namjoshi's imagination? If both Suniti and S2 are fictional characters, then S2 is the fiction of a fiction..... then again, Namjoshi seems to say that perhaps the 'real world' itself is a fiction, and all of us characters performing an absurdist script.

simultaneously disallowing it.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, the stereotype functions as a form of knowledge that constructs the subject as 'already known', and simultaneously figures the subject as 'lack'.<sup>80</sup> Thus it is significant that Suniti's splitting occurs after the Bud section in the novel, where she has been stereotyped and fixed as Bud's foreign partner, and simultaneously been made invisible for the same reason:

The fetish or stereotype gives access to an 'identity' which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it. This conflict of pleasure/unpleasure, mastery/defence, knowledge/disavowal, absence/presence, has a fundamental significance for colonial discourse. For the scene of fetishism is also the scene of the reactivation and repetition of primal fantasy- the subject's desire for a pure origin that is always threatened by its division, for the subject must be gendered to be engendered, to be spoken..... the disavowal of difference turns the colonial subject into a misfit- a grotesque mimicry or 'doubling' that threatens to split the soul and whole, undifferentiated skin of the ego.

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This is seen in the creation of S2. As Bhabha points out, the ambivalence of the stereotype, the vacillation between 'rigidity' and 'daemonic repetition' in terms of representation means that there is a problem for closure within this discourse- 'the recognition and disavowal of "difference" is always disturbed

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

by the question of its re-presentation or construction.’<sup>82</sup> Namjoshi’s textual strategy shows us that it is this ‘paradoxical mode of representation’, these anxieties and ambiguities that allow sites of contestation and gaps to emerge, in which colonised subjects can articulate their hitherto suppressed voices, and begin to reclaim their bodies and identities.

Within the apparatus of colonial power, the discourses of sexuality and race relate in a process of *functional overdetermination*, ‘because each effect..... enters into resonance or contradiction with the others and thereby calls for a readjustment or a reworking of the heterogeneous elements that surface at various points.’<sup>83</sup>

Thus the split project of colonial discourse and the split in the colonial subject prevent a neat closure, a ‘filling in the gaps’ and allow interpolated (sub)versions and (re)writings of ‘reality’.

#### **D. Men Are Martians, Women Are Furniture.**

Thus Namjoshi drives home the point that lesbians of colour have to contend with overt or covert racism, besides sexism and homophobia, as well as issues of a ‘visible invisibility’, on a daily basis. Suniti’s thoughts also suggest that it is easy to internalise these dominant discourses and perpetuate them in the form of self-hatred and self-alienation due to what is seen as the constant lack of societal/parental/peer approval and

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

acceptance. Even Suniti is briefly tempted at the thought of 'passing' as heterosexual,<sup>84</sup> of 'blending in' and being approved of:

Everyone seems to approve of us. I feel so good, so safe, so respectable..... I belong!

Later that night my conscience bothers me. 'B', I say, 'what about our identities? Aren't we being false to our true selves?'

'It's all right,' she says, 'identity is fluid. Haven't you heard of transmigration? And you call yourself a good Brahmin?'

I don't, as a matter of fact, but I let that pass.

'But, B, aren't you really a lesbian cow?'

'Well, I don't know,' she says. 'That seems a bit exotic....What's wrong with being a white man?' (p. 32).

Here again we see a deliberately provocative appropriation and blurring of gender, 'race', sexuality, and sex; Bhadravati becomes an obnoxious, loud, racist, sexist white man, Bud, and immediately starts treating Suniti and other women like inferior but erotic 'others':

She sets off down the street with an appalling swagger, jostles everyone....A sports car comes to a screeching halt. The driver is a woman. She yells something. Baddy yells back, 'You fucking cunt!'

'Baddy,' I say to her, 'You're not a man, you're a lesbian cow. How could you say that?'...

'It was part of the role.' She has dropped her American accent; she looks uncomfortable.

'But there are all sorts of men, Baddy. If you had to pass, why

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<sup>84</sup> I discuss the implications of 'passing' in greater detail in Chapter 4.

couldn't you have passed for a gentle one?'

'Haven't got the money.' (pp. 25-29).

This is indeed, the foregrounding of gender and sex as 'performance'; that is, there is here the notion that they are discursively produced constructs- 'regulatory fictions' in Judith Butler's terms.<sup>85</sup> But even when Bud behaves himself and tries to fade into the background, it is Suniti who is ignored, or treated like a piece of furniture because she is, in her own terms, 'a small brown woman', not a 'large white man'. As Suniti says:

When we get to Montreal and stop at a hotel, I try to check in while Bud stands quietly looking over my shoulder. But the clerk at the counter addresses him exclusively. I put it down to him allying himself with a fellow-Martian. But what am I to make of the waitress at dinner who behaves as though only Bud existed and I was furniture? (p. 98).

In this case Bud does not have to do anything, he is still backed by 'fellow- Martians'. Interestingly, this is the only point in the novel where Suniti actually encounters a 'male-identified' woman- one who has been incorporated into patriarchal society, and thus helps to perpetuate discrimination against her own sex/gender. It is natural, I suppose, for a woman of Suniti's positionality to interpret this as a deeper betrayal than if a man had behaved this way; Suniti *expects* to be treated as inferior or invisible by men, but to have to contend with discrimination from a woman is a shock. Again, the issues raised by Namjoshi

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<sup>85</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 32.

are more complex than Suniti's reaction suggests. The author explores the material and ideological specificities that constitute Suniti as 'powerless' in this context; Suniti is constructed as 'racial other' and 'non-man' by the waitress, which makes the waitress- rather than Bud- the perpetrator of oppression. This tactic disrupts simplistic connections between gender and power (man/perpetrator, woman/victim), and debunks the Western feminist assumption of a sisterhood based purely on gender, that transcends ethnicities, cultures, histories and classes. 'Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in historical and political practice and analysis' <sup>86</sup>.

Namjoshi uses the characters in the novel to articulate various facets of her personal/political ideology, as well as to critically examine contemporary debates about identity and representation. Therefore it is not surprising that Cowslip has her own theory about what constitutes 'Class A' and 'Class B' people. She explicitly says that cows are Class A and implies that women like Suniti are Class B. But Bud's behaviour makes it very clear that Class A could apply to men as well. Cowslip's theory is, once again, meant to teach Suniti how to 'pass':

'The world, as you know, is neatly divided into Class A humans and Class B humans. The rest don't count. How they look, walk and talk depends on television, but there are some factors which remain constant for several years. For example, Class A people don't wear lipstick, Class B people do. Class A people

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<sup>86</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes', in Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (eds.), *Third World Women and The Politics of Feminism*, pp. 56-58.



spread themselves out. Class B people apologise for so much as occupying space. Class A people stand like blocks. Class B people look unbalanced. Class A people never smile. Class B people smile placatingly twice in a minute and seldom require any provocation. Now it's quite obvious that cows have all the characteristics of Class A people..... Your best bet is to let them assume you are one.' (pp. 23-24).

This passage also exposes the constructed nature of a 'superior' European Knowledge, that is, subverts Knowledge as a transcendental signifier. It can be read as a parody of colonial/patriarchal pseudo-scientific/anthropological 'case studies', that set themselves up as the purveyors of Truth and efface alternate/resistant modes of being. I also interpret this passage as a critique of the ways in which most women are conditioned and expected to accept a submissive, pliant role, and are taught since childhood, to be good, quiet, well-behaved and 'lady-like'.

The 'Bud' sections in the novel are important because they serve to illustrate, as it were, Suniti's theories about men and patriarchy. Though Suniti does make passing references to 'gentle' men and gentlemen, her theories encompass all men, without raising issues of difference or cultural specificity. Thus we see a strongly separatist ideology in operation, which I must quote in order to do justice to the quality of Namjoshi's wit:

'....Suniti, what do you know about being a man?'

'In theory quite a lot. That's what literature is all about- the nature of man. In practice very little. I've come to the

conclusion that men are aliens.'

Charlotte is interested. 'Ah, do you think that they're a different species? Different from women or cows or poodles?'

I'm in for it. I say firmly. 'No, I mean that they did not originate on the planet earth.'

.....

'In what capacity did they arrive on earth?' Charlotte wants to know.

'Invaders. This may be deduced from their subsequent behaviour.' For this bit of theory I have adopted my driest and most academic manner.

'But, Suniti,' she says, 'How did they adjust?'

'.....by means of mutation and biological manipulation and a massive mythologisation of the planetary purpose.' (pp. 90-91).

Men are indeed colonising invaders from Mars, according to Suniti. I suggest that Namjoshi deliberately and strategically sets up binary oppositions in order to focus on the perpetuation by dominant cultures/discourses of racist, patriarchal, homophobic/heterosexist ideologies, and the negotiation of them by marginalised 'others'. In this instance, men and women are polarised into hierarchised dichotomies of oppressor/oppressed, powerful/powerless. But the author's depiction of racism in Anglo lesbian communities shows that she is aware of the various contexts, asymmetries and histories which can disrupt these dichotomies. This awareness comes across clearly in later works such as *The Mothers of Maya Diip*. This novel is a study of oppression and unequal relations of power within a mythical matriarchy. Maya Diip is an island

ruled by the Ranisaheb, whose title, as the Blue Donkey points out, means 'Queen. It does not mean the Feminist Poetry Collective'.<sup>87</sup> A sense of unease surfaces in the first few pages itself, because of the ambivalence of the name of the matriarchy- 'Maya' can mean both compassion and illusion.<sup>88</sup> The protagonists, Jyanvi and Blue Donkey, are lesbian-feminists who have preconceived notions about life in a matriarchy. But they soon have to rethink their visions of a female utopia. In Maya Diip, motherhood is apotheosised, women do not receive adult status till they become mothers, and mothers are strictly graded by the State in terms of their 'suitability' (much like the strategies a patriarchal Nation-State deploys to control women's bodies, sexuality and reproduction). Girl children are valued greatly, while boy children are milked of their semen and abandoned under the 'Tree of Death'.<sup>89</sup> Boys who survive to puberty commit suicide, or 'dive into the sea and turn into foam',<sup>90</sup> as the officially sanctioned version puts it. Anyone who dares to question these practices is exiled. A power struggle between the Ranisaheb and her daughters culminates in a coup. Namjoshi clearly implies that essentialised gender binaries have to be unpacked and dismantled in order to achieve any sort of progress- the mere inversion of binaries is not enough. This matriarchy, with its abuses of power, intolerance of difference, and complete devalueing of one gender/sex is no different from a repressive patriarchy.

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<sup>87</sup> S. Namjoshi, *The Blue Donkey Fables and The Mothers of Maya Diip*, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

This examination is more challenging and subtle in *The Conversations of Cow*. Bhadravati goes one step further, claiming that to be a Martian, and gain access to 'Martian circles', all that is needed is some make-up and appropriate padding- thus implying that men only impersonate 'received' and stereotypical notions of masculinity, which are easily duplicated with the right 'equipment'. But this is also an implicit comment on the constructed nature of gender itself, once again emphasising the notion that gender is 'performed' and thus, is potentially transgressive for subverting the fixity of phallogentric representation. Namjoshi repeatedly emphasises that identities are both, imposed, and self-consciously created. Perhaps Namjoshi is also saying that we are all playing roles that involve make-up and padding; that when layers and facades are stripped away, sometimes all we get is more masks, or then stare into an abyss of nothingness:

'...You can be my mistress. We could call ourselves The Man from Mars and His Reluctant Companion.'

'But, B, how could you possibly turn into a Man from Mars?'

'It's really quite simple- a little padding, a little make-up and a great deal of confidence.' (pp. 93-94).

To Suniti, distinguishing between patriarchal and non-patriarchal men is pointless- all men are, by virtue of being male, dominating, chauvinist pigs, whose only mission in life is the systemic oppression of all (non-Martian) others. As she says: 'B is just B, but when Bud does something, he's backed by the forces of the Martian Empire.' (p. 101). Of course, by this she means the social/political/historical structures that serve to

maintain and perpetuate heterosexist, patriarchal, oppressive ideologies. The word 'Empire' is used deliberately, serving to foreground how, in colonial discourse, histories of threatened or explicit violence were either suppressed, or represented as 'consensual' encounters. But just when one thinks that this feminist debate that is being couched in terms of an alien conspiracy theory cannot possibly get any more absurd, it gets positively Lewis Carrollian- Bhadravati reveals the big secret- Men from Mars are actually women:

'I'll tell you another thing, and this is a top secret, a well-guarded one- all Martians are unsatisfactory ones.'

I laugh. 'But, B, that's a well-known fact.'

She looks put out. 'Well, at least you'll concede that you and the Martians have something in common.'

I smile, but it's an unsatisfactory solution. At last I ask, 'Are you trying to tell me that Men from Mars are really women?'

'Yes. You've got it at last.'

'But, B, why do they behave so differently from women?'

'Lack of opportunity and education, my dear.' (pp. 107-108).

This exchange could also be interpreted as an over-turning, not only of patriarchal constructs of women as 'non-men' or 'lack', but also the age-old misogyny disguised and perpetuated as humour ('Why can't a woman be more like a man?')<sup>91</sup>. Here, women are the standard or norm that men are being measured against, and are found sadly wanting. Namjoshi captures perfectly the smug, patronising tone that many men lapse into when talking about women as a disadvantaged group, in

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<sup>91</sup> The song made popular by Professor Henry Higgins in the film 'My Fair Lady'.

Bhadravati's 'pat' reply and the use of 'my dear' at the end of the sentence.

### **E. Human Animals, Beastly Humans.**

Bhadravati in her manifestation as the insufferable Bud, of course, only 'proves' Suniti right, and reinforces her belief. This is interesting, because Suniti is always aware of issues of difference with regard to women. In fact she is constantly fighting overt and covert racism even within Anglo-lesbian communities, whether they consist of women or cows. An exchange with Bhadravati enlightens her as to the differences within cow communities, whereas previously she had just assumed that cows were cows. But Bhadravati asks her to be specific when referring to cows: 'A male cow or a female cow? A lesbian cow or a heterosexual one? Pedigreed or non-pedigreed?...' (p. 42). It is useful to read Suniti's justification for her theory and compare the following passage to a piece from Namjoshi's theoretical writing. Suniti's fictional explanation has strong roots in Namjoshi's personal/political ideology- though the fiction takes the theory to a bizarre and witty extreme:

'Well, as you know, man himself is right at the centre of the literary universe. Pigs and poodles, bats and babies, women and children, the earth itself, are always "the other". Now how to explain this inexplicable division, this perverse passion to make "the other" conform to the requirements of man's desire? It doesn't make sense, unless, of course, one starts with the postulate that men, in fact, are really

Whereas Namjoshi the academic writes:

To me a beast wasn't 'bestial' in the Western sense. To me a bird or a beast was a creature like anyone else. Hinduism is, after all, pantheistic; and the popular notion of reincarnation attributes a soul to everyone. This may sound odd to Western ears, but for me, it was as familiar as it was unconscious..... in a humanistic universe, which has been male-centred historically, women are 'the other', together with birds and beasts and the rest of creation.... I don't want to be separated from the birds and the beasts, nor do I want to 'humanise' them particularly. <sup>92</sup>

While Namjoshi does not separate herself from birds and animals, she does humanise them; Cow is incorrigibly human and definitely humanised- (as are all of Namjoshi's talking creatures, like the Blue Donkey, the One-Eyed Monkey, various amorous tigeresses, reclusive mares, sensitive crocodiles and pedantic magpies)- even though she is sometimes cow-like and sometimes a Goddess; while Suniti is distinctly 'beastly' right through the novel, and is constantly embarrassed when she catches herself doing it:

That night I dream. Cow has transformed herself into a woman. She is wearing a sari and sitting on the lawn of a large house under a banyan..... I feel such admiration and love for her.... I'm a well-kept poodle.... I'm an excellent animal. (pp. 45-47).

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<sup>92</sup> S. Namjoshi, *Because Of India*, quoted in P. Duncker, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

This humanising of/identification with animals raises complex issues of interpretation. What does it mean in terms of the strategies Namjoshi deploys in her writing? I have mentioned in the introduction that Namjoshi seems to have a suspicion of the human race, which is reiterated in her work. It is not unreasonable to suggest that this suspicion arises from her awareness that a woman of her positionality is marginalised on multiple levels by mainstream society, and from her own experiences of sexism, racism and homophobia. The following lines from her poem 'Explanation' demonstrate the above clearly:

Why do you write about plants and animals?

Why not people?

.....

if ordinary people would behave like trees,

or like cats and dogs, or better still

like the wilder animals, then I could admit

a dispassionate liking for each one of them

.....

Someone explains,

'A tree is not a person. A boy is not a cat.'

'Yes,' I reply, striving for patience,

'that is the problem. Precisely that.'

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Thus Namjoshi implies that animals are 'more human' than human creatures, because the former do not wound or kill out of hatred, intolerance, or spite. The passage from Namjoshi's

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<sup>93</sup> S. Namjoshi, 'Explanation', in *The Blue Donkey Fables*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.



non-fiction shows that her Hindu roots play a strong part in shaping her consciousness and voice, particularly in relation to her use of and identification with talking animals.<sup>94</sup> In traditional Hindu teachings-

Considerable emphasis is placed on the universal quality of all human beings, on the values of tolerance and compassion, and on the need for harmony between man and nature through recognition of the rights of each- all of which would lead to spiritual peace. <sup>95</sup>

For example, the *Panchatantra* anthropomorphises animals in order to teach 'universal' truths and 'human' values. Namjoshi uses this tenet that both humans and animals have souls and are therefore part of the whole fabric of creation, which explains to an extent, why she humanises animals. But she then uses the technique/strategy of anthropomorphism to subvert these constructs. That is, through her feminist-lesbian reworkings, she points out how the terms 'universal' and 'human' often mask and perpetuate patriarchal vested interests, hierarchies of class/caste and misogyny. Thus through her use of human animals, she is able to effectively problematise the uncritical acceptance of the teachings of Hinduism, and critically examine the debates of lesbian-feminist theory. In Namjoshi's own words- 'The *Panchatantra* is a Sanskrit book of fables. Unlike Aesop's it contains both brahmins and beasts.' <sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> D. McGifford, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

<sup>95</sup> Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1978), p. 27.

<sup>96</sup> S. Namjoshi, 'From the Panchatantra', in *Feminist Fables*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

The humanising of/identification with animals can also be interpreted as a deflected 'colonisation' by someone 'colonised' on multiple levels; an effort, perhaps, to displace

that 'otherness' which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity. <sup>97</sup>

Namjoshi's work also raises the question of 'imagined realities' in relation to inhabited realities.<sup>98</sup> This is seen especially in the invention of a self-sustaining collective of lesbian cows. As discussed earlier, postcolonial hybridity is not a comfortable state of being- the postcolonial hybrid constructs a self that is excruciatingly produced to inhabit many discursive positions. This precludes the positing of a unified subjectivity and/or a hermetic identity. Analysed in these terms, the invention of lesbian collective of cows can be read as a self-critique of the longing for a pure space of marginalism beyond the cultural-political, a space that is transcendent of ideological interpellations and regimes of power.

But the cow-collective simultaneously posits another possibility, and that is- an exploration of ways of belonging, through an examination of the notion of community. Radhakrishnan contends that minority communities must share 'worldviews, theories, values and strategies' in order not to be disempowered and coopted.<sup>99</sup> In the context of the end of *The Conversations of Cow*, the invention of lesbian cows can be read

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<sup>97</sup> H. Bhabha, 'The Other Question', *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>98</sup> R. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 769.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 767.

as Namjoshi's attempt to depict a solidarity between minorities which is achieved slowly and is fraught with difficult issues, but is ultimately empowering.

Inevitably Suniti's metamorphoses, whether in dreams or reality, come about as a direct result of Cow's various, sudden and unpredictable manifestations. Suniti's dream of being a poodle comes after Suniti has confessed to Cow that she is worried because she thinks she is becoming a misogynist; that women have broken her heart once too often.

'B,' I say suddenly, 'I think I'm becoming a misogynist.'

'I see,' she replies. 'Well, that's rather awkward since you are yourself-'

'A woman. Yes, I know. The wrong soul in the wrong body.

That sort of thing.' (p. 41).

This confession gains an added ironic dimension because it is made to Cow, who blithely switches bodies and souls right through the novel. Of course, this means that Cow cannot resist the temptation to be perverse and change into a beautiful woman. Suniti, who is having a hard enough time dealing with the changes within herself on her voyage of self-discovery and self-construction, cannot cope with having to slip into yet another position- that of being Bhadravati's prospective lover- and hence tries to escape both, her selves, and Bhadravati. The humour in these situations also arises from Suniti's reading her own phrases very literally. For example:

I look sheepish, then catch myself at it. First a poodle, then a sheep. Where will it end? (p. 54).

And also:

I get up and slouch about. 'Just have a headache, feel a bit bearish.' So now I'm a bear? (p. 55).

This close identification with animals, especially cows, starts to make sense in the light of Namjoshi's ideology, the implications of which I have discussed above. The following passage involving Suniti, S2, as well as Cow, sums this up nicely:

'What are you looking for?' Boudicca asks.

'We're looking for Cow,' S2 answers.

'Cow?'

'For Buddy,' I explain.

'Do you mean Baddy?' Cowslip inquires.

'Bhadravati,' S2 answers.

'What does she look like?'

'She looks like you,' S2 says.

'She looks like us,' I put in. (p. 115).

This passage demonstrates that a politics of solidarity, of a concept of 'community' that has been arrived at through a painful process of self-production. It is a concept of community that has the space for the 'multiple-rootedness' posited by Radhakrishnan and for new ways of belonging, that does not impose an artificial disjunction between 'authenticity' and 'invention'. Here, when Suniti and S2 say that Cow 'looks like you' and 'like us' they mean she is a kindred spirit, a Goddess, a sister, a lover, a friend, just like them. She plays all these roles in their lives, and more. The connection that has been made

means that they all have similar scars, and a similar inner strength born out of similar struggles.

But just as importantly, Cow is in turn taught by Suniti to question her own prejudices and the traditions she takes as 'given'. For instance, a poignant interlude in the novel demonstrates this, once again exploring what I would interpret as Namjoshi's over-riding concern- ways of belonging, ways of resisting, ways of loving and being loved, ways of accepting and coming to terms with one's selves, and with difference:

I ask her gently, 'B, if you cut me open, what would you find?'

She smiles. 'Crickets and cockroaches, the carcasses of dead animals, pine trees and peepal trees, giraffes and ostriches, forests and rivers, entire bestiaries.'

'Do you mind, B?'

'No, I don't mind. I'm glad of it.'.....

'If you were to cut me open, Suniti, what would you find?'

'Blood and guts, a functioning body, a living creature.'

'Will it do, Suniti?'

'You know it will.' That night B and I become lovers. The birds wake us up the next morning.... They are celebrating the fact.... well, they are celebrating the world. (pp. 85-86).

## F. Double-Coding, Double Reading: A Scotch and Water Guzzling Goddess.

The joys, sorrows, struggles, hardships, self-doubt and moments of epiphany in Suniti's life are explored in all their complexity; Suniti the fictional writer, along with her work of art, is thus placed not outside society, but within a culturally and historically specific context. As Patricia Duncker says:

For a woman to write her life as a perceiving subject, to be both the one who acts and the one who records, is a decisive political gesture. <sup>100</sup>

It is interesting to read the synopsis written for the reader in this light: '....the dialogue between Suniti and Bhadravati challenges our every assumption about how we relate to each other.'<sup>101</sup> While I agree that the conversations of Suniti and Cow challenge many assumptions, the question that can then be asked is- Who is this 'we' that this synopsis talks about? An audience of primarily feminist/lesbian-feminist western women? Is there a danger, because of Namjoshi's emphasis on the 'Indianness' of her heroines being recuperated into essentialised stereotypes of 'race' and ethnicity? Or does she deliberately mobilise discourses of strategic essentialism in order to foreground and subvert these stereotypes? Namjoshi's

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<sup>100</sup> P. Duncker, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>101</sup> S. Namjoshi, *The Conversations of Cow*, *op. cit.*, Quoted from jacket cover. I have used this source because of the extremely limited text-related commentary available, and because it is an interesting indication of how Namjoshi's work is positioned for readers by publishing houses .

work has not generated much of a critical response apart from reviews,<sup>102</sup> and is not easily available in India, except in large cities and some University libraries. Judging from this, her Indian audience would consist primarily of the metropolitan, literary/academic intelligentsia. On the other hand, it is difficult to say that Namjoshi does write primarily for western audiences. It is true that she does not use Indian-English or glossaries. But as a speaker of Marathi, I find in her sharp, succinct, staccato dialogue, distinctly Marathi rhythms and intonations. For example in *The Conversations of Cow*, Suniti's repeated use of 'But' followed by a small pause when she begins a sentence, as in 'But, B...', is similar to the Marathi sentence construction when arguing with a familiar person- ('Pun, tu'). Similarly, her repeated expression of 'And then what happened?' seems to be a literal translation of the Marathi phrase- 'aani mug kay zhaale?' often used to drive the narration in Marathi fairytales and katha. Sentences such as 'the sun was shining like anything',<sup>103</sup> also serve to foreground a Marathi intonation, especially with the implied stress on 'anything'.

Then there is also her use of Hinduism and Hindu concepts, such as cow-worship. Namjoshi's character draws strength from her Indian/Hindu up-bringing, yet undermines it in a tongue-in-cheek manner. For example: 'Baddy, I swear I'll never touch beef again. I was corrupted in North America. You know quite well Hindus don't eat beef...' (p. 25). And earlier:

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<sup>102</sup> D. McGifford, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

<sup>103</sup> S. Namjoshi, 'The One-Eyed Monkey Goes Into Print', in *The Blue Donkey Fables*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

A week later. Cow drops in for a drink again: scotch and water, very colonial- but in a finger bowl.

‘What do you live on?’ I blurt it out.

‘Welfare’, she replies. Not as good as the pickings in India.

There one is supposed to be worshipped as a god, not that one is- but the climate is warmer.’ (pp. 14-17).

On one level, Namjoshi constantly fulfils Western expectations in relation to ‘Indianness’, with regard to Suniti, and Suniti’s attitude to white men, women and white cows- Suniti is a small, brown, Hindu Indian woman who believes that Bhadravati the Brahmin cow is a Goddess. But Suniti also has an ironic awareness of Cow’s ‘colonial’ fondness for scotch and water, and that this makes Cow a scotch and water guzzling Brahmin Goddess with a contrived American accent. This ‘doubleness’ can be read in terms of Bhabha’s critical consideration of diasporic communities:

Their metaphoric movement requires a kind of ‘doubleness’ in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without a ‘centred’ causal logic..... Indeed the exercise of power may be both more politically effective and psychically *affective* because their discursive liminality may provide greater scope for strategic manoeuvre and negotiation.....

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Namjoshi makes no claims to ‘authenticity’ of representation, but posits that identity politics are never a matter of finding categories to define oneself or others, and then fitting into or

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<sup>104</sup> H. Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation’ *op. cit.*, pp. 293, 296-297.



forcing others to fit into those categories. As Spivak says-

One needs to be vigilant against simple notions of identity which overlap neatly with language or location. I'm deeply suspicious of any determinist or positivist definition of identity, and this is echoed in my attitude to writing styles.

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Ways of belonging or not belonging are multilayered and complex. Both Suniti and Cow constantly question blind belief and rigidity of thought and feeling, whether it is to do with religion or personal/political ideology. Cow knows that she is not a Goddess- at least not in the sense that Suniti defines her<sup>106</sup>- and is entirely amused at the idea, as can be seen from her dry, throw-away reference to the subject in the above quote. This point is emphasised later in the novel, in section II, when Bhadravati takes Suniti on journey. This journey is both a physical and a psychic one, involving the exploration of both, landscapes and mindscapes, for this is what Suniti wants (or thinks she needs): 'You know, a journey of exploration. We undergo ordeals, and then I find out who I really am.' (p. 58). All the journey does is confuse Suniti even more, and cause even more existential angst. She begins to realise that the question 'who am I?' begins to map out a fraught and complex series of even more inextricably intertwined issues. She realises that Cow does not know all the answers, that the answers lie within. The more facets of Cow she sees, the more she knows this on an intellectual level. There is a schism between mind

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<sup>105</sup> G. C. Spivak, 'Strategy, Identity, Writing', in *The Post-Colonial Critic*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>106</sup> I discuss Namjoshi's ideas about women and goddesses in greater detail later on.

and heart, however, that only she can heal herself. For example, the following is a conversation between Bhadravati and her sister Charlotte, where Suniti sees a rather nasty part of Cow, but still believes (or wants to believe) on some level that Cow has the answers:

‘Where on earth did you find her?’

‘In a park in Toronto. She was kneeling on the grass. She looked so peculiar that I walked up to her. When she opened her eyes, we got into a conversation.’

B giggles. ‘She thought I was a goddess.’ (p. 71).

The exchange between Cow and Charlotte is also significant because Charlotte is English, human, and is not a Hindu, but is Cow's sister. This realisation forces Suniti to rethink her own ideas about ‘race’, cultural difference and relationships. She accepts her own relationship with Cow, even fighting for Cow's right to be in a restaurant:

‘Everything alright, sir?’

‘Yes, thank you, but I am not a “Sir”, I am a lesbian, and my friend is a cow.’

‘GET THAT COW OUT OF HERE!’

I draw myself up to my fullest height. (He's still a foot taller.)

‘That cow is a citizen of planet earth. If you throw us out, I shall complain about you to the Human Rights Commission.’

(pp. 23-24).

It is typical of Namjoshi's playing with signs and signifiers, as well as reader-expectations, that the manager expresses

‘Cowphobia’ rather than homophobia or racism<sup>107</sup>- right through the novel it is as though Cow becomes a site signifying of displaced prejudice and hate, while Suniti struggles to assert her visibility and to be seen as an individual, rather than just as a signifier of difference. But inspite of having experienced discrimination on a variety of levels, she finds it difficult to accept Charlotte and Cow’s relationship for what it is- a caring, reciprocal one, and she is dismayed at her own reaction to them. Perhaps Namjoshi wants to suggest that even politically committed lesbian-feminists of colour are not always as tolerant of difference as they would like to think. Of course Suniti relates to Cow on a multiplicity of levels because of their commonality of Hindu backgrounds, membership of a minority group and woman-identified politics. But through the Charlotte-Cow relationship, Suniti also learns that it is possible for beings to make a deep connection that goes beyond discursive categories of ‘race’, gender, and in this case, even species- without necessarily effacing cultural specificities and other differences. The Charlotte-Cow relationship illustrates what Chandra Talpade Mohanty contends is the potential of ‘imagined community’; in the sense that it is an alliance across divisive boundaries, which emphasises the political, rather than essentialist notions of ‘biology’ or ‘culture’ as a basis for alliance.<sup>108</sup> Hence the issues raised here are multiple and thought-provoking. As Radhakrishnan says:

To me and many others in the diaspora, the politics of

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<sup>107</sup> Just as in *The Blue Donkey Fables*, it is Donkey’s blueness that causes problems, rather than her species, lesbianism, or feminism.

<sup>108</sup> C. T. Mohanty, Introduction, in *Third World Women and The Politics Of Feminism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

solidarity with other minorities and diasporic ethnicities is as important and primary as the politics of the “representations of origins”. It is in this sense then that I am in favour of the allegorization of the “postcolonial condition”: that the allegory be made available as that relational space to be spoken for heterogeneously but relationally diverse subaltern/ oppressed/ minority subject positions in their attempts to seek justice and reparation for centuries of unevenness and inequality. Diasporic communities do not want to be rendered discrete or separate from other diasporic communities, for that way lies cooptation and depoliticization. To authenticate their awareness of themselves as a form of political knowledge, these communities need to share worldviews, theories, values and strategies so that none of them will be “divided and ruled” by the racism of the dominant historiography.

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## **G. Women and Goddesses.**

It is only at the end of the book that Suniti finally accepts that the only way to experience the goddess aspect of Bhadravati, is to let go of her expectations of Cow, and also to acknowledge the goddess(es) within herself- both, the empowering Kali, the Goddess of Destruction and Creation, and the gentle Saraswati, Goddess of Wisdom and Learning. In Hindu mythology, Goddesses are rarely bloodless, sexless women who are defined *only* in terms of their relationships to male Gods or male mortal

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<sup>109</sup> R. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 767.

heroes. For example, Parvati is Shiva's consort. But she is also very powerful in her manifestation as Durga, the warrior-Goddess. The *Skanda Puranas* and *Markandeya Puranas* relate how she defeated the demon Mahishasura, who had humbled even Brahma and Vishnu.<sup>110</sup> After all, she is one face of Shakti, the primal female principle, the source of all creativity. She has her 'dark', killer side, which is manifested in the form of Kali or Chamundi, for destruction and creation must co-exist in order to maintain the cosmic balance. This ideology has its problems, and could be seen as buying into essentialised representations of 'The Female Principle' (Woman is 'naturally' creative/nurturing, Woman is 'naturally' destructive)<sup>111</sup>, as well as the loaded hierarchical dichotomies implicit within the notions of a gender-specific 'essence'. But as I have discussed earlier, Namjoshi deliberately uses binary oppositions, and is aware that a certain section of her readership would immediately begin to critique this usage in Section V: Conjuring Cow. In this section, Suniti and S2 come to the conclusion that Cow is also Spindleshanks, the terrible cow who ate and destroyed the entire world, and then burst:

'The blackness was now both outside and inside. And Spindleshanks herself, fragments of Spindleshanks were a part of the world.' (p. 85.).

So then the invocation to Cow includes both, descriptions of Cow as nurturing friend and lover, and as a destructive force:

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<sup>110</sup> W. J. Wilkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 298-300.

<sup>111</sup> I deliberately use the word 'Woman' in the singular with a capital 'W' to emphasise that the monolithic construct leaves no room for the specificities and heterogeneity of 'women'.

‘..... you who have sported in the woods with me, and have laughed and mocked and been my friend.... O you who have reduced me to almost nothing, then made me a present of the world and myself.... O you who contain a terrible hunger, ever assuaged and feeding itself...’ (p. 123).

Then Namjoshi just as deliberately pre-empts criticism by having Suniti say: ‘But it savours of dualism or Manichaeism...’ (p. 123). But Namjoshi’s use of this ideology is empowering, in terms of women taking up the Goddess power within themselves and taking control of their creativity and lives. In this sense, the text posits that every woman has the potential to be a Goddess and rejoice in the fluidity of her many forms, and not be contained by a rigid, phallogentric society. It is this realisation that enables Suniti to reclaim her power as a woman and a lesbian:

‘Cow,’ I tell her solemnly, ‘I think you’re a goddess.’

‘Cow seems amused. ‘So are you, Suniti.’

I’m appalled. ‘Oh no,’ I exclaim. ‘I make no such claims.

I, really, you know, I don’t have the energy.’

‘But you can’t help it, Suniti.

You’re alive, you know.’ (p. 124).

These interchanges have certain resonances for me, that they perhaps would not have for an Anglo reader;<sup>112</sup> For

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<sup>112</sup> I do not mean that my reading of the text is somehow better or more valid than a non-Indian reader’s. This book opens up a multiplicity of reading positions, and some Indian-feminist readings argue that Namjoshi buys into reductionist politics of representation by reproducing binarised notions of gender and race (Rahi Dahake, unpublished paper, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1995). I mean that the book has intellectual, spiritual and emotional resonances for me as a lesbian-feminist migrant Indian woman, which enhance my

instance, I am able to identify closely with Suniti's both grounding herself in Indian traditions and violently breaking away from them; I am able to appreciate the use of and tongue-in-cheek subversion of the Sanskritic invocations at the end. The following lines from the *Ganapati Upanishad* illustrate this-

I praise thee, O Lord of difficulties! The beloved spouse of knowledge and understanding; Ganapati, invincible, and the giver of victory; the opposer of obstacles to the success of men who do not worship thee! I praise thee, O Ganesha! The dreadful son of Uma, but firm and easily propitiated, O Vinayaka, I praise thee! <sup>113</sup>

Thus we see that the language Suniti uses to conjure Cow is a perfect parody of Sanskrit hymns to various Gods and Goddesses, complete with 'one long sentence, and one short one' (p. 123); along with long lists of positive and negative names and attributes.<sup>114</sup> The 'incongruity' that results from reading about 'daffodils and crocuses'- (associated by many English-speaking Indian readers with memories of being forced to memorise reams of Wordsworth and Keats in school)- juxtaposed with a Brahmin cow, strikes me just as it does Suniti. It is these resonances that make it impossible to see Suniti as an essentialised stereotype. Furthermore, she is also a separatist, lesbian- feminist with strong opinions (hardly the 'typical' Indian woman in relation to the expectations of European audiences), and does not sit back and take racism,

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appreciation of Namjoshi's strategic negotiations.

<sup>113</sup> Translated by W. J. Wilkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 330-331.

<sup>114</sup> To give another example, Krishna is known by many names, a few of which are: Muralidhara (player of the flute), Shyam (the dark-skinned one), Sundara (the beautiful one), Devakinandan (the son of Devaki), and Lal (beloved).

sexism or homophobia from anyone. This itself makes her different from most male Indian writers' representations of Indian women, and is a powerful 'tactical strike'<sup>115</sup>. She refuses to play the 'Third World' victim inspite of being victimised because of her refusal to be contained by stereotypes. Therefore I think the book is aimed at a cross-section of lesbian and feminist readers who are interested in the sort of ideological debates that Namjoshi engages with in her writing.

#### **H. 'They Are Mostly White- I Am Not Colour Conscious...'**

It is significant, that at the end, Suniti starts to write down her conversations with Cow, thus claiming both narrative voice and creative authority. By naming her character Suniti, she is not only playing at blurring lines between Art and Life, but also, perhaps, poking fun at a certain genre of writing that was very popular in the 1960s and 1970s- the confessional narratives of rites of initiation, discovering 'sisterhood', or 'Coming Out' stories.<sup>116</sup> One would posit that Namjoshi is very aware that readers often tend to collapse author into narrator, and challenges her largely 'literary' readership to do so without running into massive problems of interpretation. There is also always the critical danger of containing or attempting to

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<sup>115</sup> From Luce Irigaray's, *This Sex Which is not One*, Catherine Porter (trans.), (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1985). I use the term in a more general sense than Irigaray, but the term itself smacks of subversion, suggesting as it does, a strategic negotiation of dominant discursive regimes; it seemed appropriate to use it in this context.

<sup>116</sup> For example, see Julia Penelope and Susan J. Wolfe (eds.), *The Coming Out Stories*, (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1980).



sanitise transgressive women's texts by reading them as 'autobiographical'. Namjoshi plays with this tendency in much canonical criticism. Only she, as author, can name and hence, invent the character of Suniti. This also ties in with her ideas about the 'male-centred' universe, where men have traditionally named, 'discovered', 'mapped', and hence owned their Others, that is animals and women. The novel as a whole, is a study of 'otherness'- desire for, fear of,<sup>117</sup> and coping mechanisms used by those othered by virtue of class, gender, sexuality, or 'race'. By doing so, Namjoshi foregrounds the process of invention and reinvention of our many selves, and the inherently fragmented nature of identity. The text appeals, not only because of its in-depth engagement with issues of representation, self-representation and agency, but because it engages with these issues in a sharply ironic, humorous manner. Perhaps the endorsement of separatist lesbian-feminist ideology in the earlier works dates Namjoshi's feminism somewhat, but, as I have argued earlier, it is rarely an unqualified endorsement. She does bring into sharp focus issues of a 'global sisterhood' by highlighting racism and ignorance within the anglo, middle-class feminist/lesbian/cow communities, and abuses of power in a patriarchy.

Not a single nuance of conscious or unconscious game-playing escapes her minute observations of behaviour in social situations, and the author's mockery of every character (including and above all Suniti's earnestness) often make us wince not only because of the implicit or explicit issues that are

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<sup>117</sup> H. Bhabha, 'The Other Question', *op. cit.*, p. 18.

raised, but because the deliberately banal, often bizarre dialogues and interactions are so precisely and cuttngly written. Events, emotions and perceptions not usually seen or privileged are drawn on in this novel, and significantly, Suniti records the way in which she as a woman picks up on other people's emotions:

They are mostly white- I am not colour conscious- and entirely liberal, of this last I am sure. B, I notice, has decided to be gracious.... They talk solemnly about the joys of the country, the pleasures of the pastoral.... She has thrown a turquoise and gold Benarasi stole across her shoulders. She looks magnificent.... I think about dinner, and the fact that the food will be vegetarian. I earnestly hope no one comments.... They don't seem to have noticed that she is a cow..... Don't they realise that Cow is an animal? My palms are clammy. I feel a little sick. By the time I recover, Cow and Kate are happily discussing mutual consent: whether it's all right to eat meat if there's mutual consent between eater and eaten.... At last they leave, I wave feebly. Cow has been a great success. My nerves are in shreds. (pp. 39-40).

The conventions of writing, (even those of post-colonial/post modern writing) that have for so long privileged male experiences and the 'male gaze' are broken down and abrogated to accommodate every subtle nuance of Suniti's negotiation of her subjectivity. Again, Namjoshi uses the textual strategy of playing with signs and signifiers in order to do this-the sign 'Lesbian' or 'Black' is shifted to the sign 'Cow'; therefore what

Namjoshi repeatedly does is juggle the 'counters' of fiction<sup>118</sup> in order to drive home her lessons.

Suniti expends a lot of time and energy throughout the novel negotiating the emotional needs of others. Suniti has been socialised to feel responsible for others in a way that is not expected of her female, but more so *male* Anglo peers, whether they are people or cows. This influences the ways in which she interacts (or is unable to interact) with her world, how she manages or mismanages her time, how she struggles over her right to be visible, and to be, without having to constantly erase or justify her 'difference'. Many of her battles are with herself. On one level she knows that she is a strong, worthy person, but is simultaneously plagued by self-doubt as the strain of having to inhabit too many discursive positions at once, of negotiating subject positions imposed upon her, begins to overcome her. This continual state of flux of identity and roles is brought into sharp focus when Cow decides to change gender as well as sex at will. By doing so Cow forces Suniti to confront her fears that she will never really know who she is, and re-examine the differences in the way she relates to men, women and lesbian cows.

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<sup>118</sup> P. Duncker, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

#### **IV. 'Nor Do The Reservoirs of Our Ancient Power Know These Boundaries'.**

The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know these boundaries. To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference.

For then beyond sisterhood is still racism.- Audre Lorde <sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Audre Lorde, 'An Open Letter To Mary Daly', in Maggie Humm (ed. and intro.) *Feminisms: A Reader*, (Hertfordshire: Harvester, 1992), p. 139.

### A. 'An Average Middle-Of-The-Road Lesbian Separatist.'

Because Cow is never a fixed character, Suniti must grow and change as well. In a sense, this allows space for the unspoken to be explored- for instance, racism and condescension within Anglo lesbian communities-

We spend the evening in a lesbian bar.... B is being kind to me; she introduces me to the other women. They decide for some reason that my name is Sulky. What a nice name. I'm patted on the back- nice Sulky- then ignored. (p. 59).

Thus the unspoken never becomes the unspeakable. Namjoshi deflates the myth of lesbian 'purity'- the notion that lesbians do not perpetuate discrimination and oppression because they interact 'outside' patriarchal relations of power.<sup>120</sup> While this stance is often taken as a reactive front to homophobia, it still ignores the experiences and needs of lesbians of colour.

Therefore, gender oppression cannot be the single leg on which feminism rests. It should not be limited to merely achieving equal treatment of women vis-a-vis men. This is where feminism as a philosophy must differ from the shallow notion of "women's rights."..... First World women must commonly challenge the racism of their communities, and

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<sup>120</sup> K. Fielden, 'The Year of Living Dangerously', in *Lesbians On The Loose*, vol. 8, no. 6, June 1996, pp. 24-25. Fielden discusses this in the context of domestic violence in lesbian relationships. While I don't wish to minimise the damage done by overt physical violence, her analysis of the myth of lesbian purity is applicable to Suniti's experience. There is an emotional violence in the kind of 'benevolent' racism Suniti encounters.

acknowledge and struggle against the complicity of their  
communities in the oppression of Third World women.

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Namjoshi's dry understatement often means that there are issues crowding in the margins, which are then left to the readers to unravel for themselves. This foregrounds the actual process of reading and creating meaning, the role of reader-positionality in this process, and acknowledges that alternate discourses and perceptions exist. As De Lauretis contends-

representation is related to experience by codes that change historically, and significantly, reach in both directions: the writer struggles to inscribe experience in historically available forms of representation, the reader accedes to representation through her own historical and experiential context <sup>122</sup>

Suniti and Bhadravati discuss 'Life, the Universe and Everything',<sup>123</sup> and their opinions rarely coincide. This is not really surprising, as Suniti is a literary, introspective lesbian separatist and Bhadravati is an outspoken Brahmin, lesbian cow. They are seen as occupying and speaking from the same position by Bhadravati's white lesbian cow friends, merely because Suniti and Cow are both Indian, and because both happen to identify as lesbian:

'So, you're both from India,' says Lou-Anne. 'That's really great.'

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<sup>121</sup> Cheryl Johnson-Odim, 'Common Themes, Different Contexts', in *Third World Women and The Politics of Feminism*, op. cit., pp. 320, 324.

<sup>122</sup> T. de Lauretis, op. cit., p. 145.

<sup>123</sup> The title of Douglas Adams's novel, *Life, the Universe and Everything*, from the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* trilogy.

‘Why is it great?’

‘Why, well, it just is, you know. You must tell us all about it.’

‘It’s very nice,’ I say with deliberate inanity, which I think I intend to be slightly insulting, but they don’t notice. (p. 19).

One one level, this ‘deliberate inanity’ or banality is a camouflage technique and a weapon that Suniti uses to vent her irritation and anger at the blithe assumptions made by Lou-Anne and the other white cows, who, being marginalised and politically aware themselves, should know better than to unthinkingly perpetuate racist discourses.

There are many subject positions which one must inhabit; one is not just one thing. That is when a political consciousness comes in. So that in fact, for the person who does the ‘speaking as’ something, it is a problem of distancing from one’s self, whatever that self might be. But when the cardcarrying listeners, the hegemonic people, the dominant people, talk about listening to someone ‘speaking as’ something or the other, I think *there* one encounters a problem. When *they* want to hear an Indian speaking as an Indian, a Third World woman speaking as a Third World woman, they cover over the fact of the ignorance that they are allowed to possess, into a kind of homogenisation.

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In light of Spivak’s analysis, Suniti’s deliberate inanity could also be interpreted as a ‘distancing from one’s self’. Though the cows are a minority by virtue of being lesbian cows, they play the roles of the ‘dominant’ and ‘hegemonic’ in relation to

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<sup>124</sup> G. C. Spivak, ‘Questions of Multiculturalism’, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

Bhadravati and Suniti, in seemingly innocuous ways. Spivak also points out that 'India' itself is a construct for many Indians who have a stronger sense of regional/language-based identity:

'India', for people like me, is not really a place with which they can form a national identity because it has always been an artificial construct..... it isn't a place that we Indians can think of as anything, unless we are trying to present a reactive front, against another kind of argument.... For example, when I'm constructing myself as an Indian in reaction to racism, I am very strongly taking a distance from myself. If an Indian asks me what I am, I'm a Bengali, which is very different. <sup>125</sup>

Suniti's sly refusal to accede to the cows' demand that she 'speak as' the Indian or the Third World lesbian, exposes their ignorance and monolithic cultural constructs.<sup>126</sup> The pointed question 'Why is it great?' forces the truly banal reply 'Why, well, it just is, you know.' Suniti's tactical strike is underscored by the juxtaposition of genuine and deliberate banality.

Whereas Suniti is almost too scared to even make light conversation in case she upsets or offends the cows in any way:

We talk about food. I am very careful; I think it would be better to discuss something else. (p. 21).

Lou-Anne's comment is made worse by the fact that it comes directly after an initial faux pas; in fact this section is full of

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<sup>125</sup> G. C. Spivak, 'Strategy, Identity, Writing', *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>126</sup> Though the cows' attitudes begin to shift gradually, which I have mentioned in my earlier discussion about the cow collective.



what I would term 'wince' humour- dry sarcasm that makes one want to laugh and wince simultaneously:

'I'm Suniti,' I say.

'Su? What?

I tell them again. They get it wrong.

'Well, we'll just call you Sue for short, just as we do Baddy here.' Her real name is Bhadravati. I look at Cow, who looks away. Later she says to me, 'Well, you have to adjust.'

But right then and there I say distinctly, 'No, you will not call me Sue for short.'

There's an awkward pause. (p. 18).

One winces because Namjoshi has captured precisely the sort of tension that arises out of a lack of sensitivity to cultural difference, and the overwhelming urge one encounters in certain circles, to shorten and anglicise 'difficult', that is, non-Anglo names. One feels annoyed on Suniti's behalf; it is unfair that she is continually forced into defensive or oppositional positions, and that her response is then interpreted as being rude:

'...that's all she is- a transparent ego and some sensations and impressions.'

'I am *not* merely a transparent ego.'

'No, that's true enough,' Charlotte smiles quite pleasantly. 'On occasion, I'm sure you can be quite colourful indeed, "a woman of colour".'

'That's racist!' I exclaim. (p. 72).

## B. Refusing to Pass.

These pieces of dialogue could also be tied in with my earlier point about Suniti's refusal to 'adjust' or 'pass'. It is important that she refuses to be called Sue, or to go along with a racist joke, because that would mean an effacement of Suniti along with her cultural difference and individuality. Each time she gave in, she would be compromising her personal/political integrity. Thus this refusal becomes an explicitly political stance, and once again, raises issues of representation, self-representation, and agency. Anglicising names often works as an insidious strategy to interpellate 'others' into dominant discourses, to make them the 'same'.<sup>127</sup> But one also finds it difficult not to laugh as Lou-Anne and the other cows make blunder upon blunder.

All the cows, including Bhadravati when she is emotionally occupying 'Baddy' space, are constantly and unsuccessfully trying to efface Suniti's difference, to get Suniti to 'pass'. The term 'passing' has a special significance in Anglo lesbian histories. At the turn of the century, there arose a distinct subculture of 'passing women'; that is, women who assumed male names and identities, often married women, and lived, dressed and worked 'as' men. Judith Butler argues that cross-dressing/ 'drag' is subversive in its potential to destabilise

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<sup>127</sup> I can relate to this only too well; having a name like Shalmalee means that I have to constantly make it clear that I definitely do *not* wish to be called 'Sha', or 'Lee', or derivatives thereof. A rather persistent acquaintance confessed that he insisted on calling me 'Shazza' because it was the 'Australian way', and *he* felt more comfortable not being constantly reminded of my difference.

phallogocentric constructs of sex and gender, by emphasising their discursively produced nature.<sup>128</sup> The term 'passing' is used differently in contemporary contexts, functioning to signify 'passing as a heterosexual woman'. This use of the term is objectionable: it serves to create a monolithic construct of an 'acceptable' lesbian identity in terms of visual coding and being 'out'. In Namjoshi's text, the use of and play on the word suggests an awareness of its subversive potential, but also its potential to efface difference. Suniti is occasionally tempted to 'pass' as heterosexual, as is seen in the following lines which preface her public appearance as Bud's partner, but she refuses to 'pass' as white in the context of ethnicity; that is, she does not downplay her non-white/Indian appearance, thus articulating a resistance to assimilationist practices.

'How do I look?'

'You look charming,' she says.

I preen a little.

'But your skin is still brown.'

'Yes?' I say, challenging her, but Bhadravati is in a good mood.

'It's all right.' She winks at me. 'You'll pass.' (p. 31).

Similarly, Cowslip makes a telling comment after Suniti and Cow have been thrown out of a restaurant: 'Oh,' says Cowslip. 'You said who you were. You must learn how to pass.....' (p. 23).

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<sup>128</sup> See Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, (New York: William Morrow, 1981), for a revisionist examination of (suppressed) histories of sexual-romantic relationships between women. Also see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 136-138.

## V. Conclusion.

‘Both cultures deny me a place in their universe..... I build my own universe.... I belong to myself and not to any one people.’ - Gloria Anzaldua <sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Gloria Anzaldua, from 'La Prieta', in *Feminisms*, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

The use of allegory and fables, and specially the use of 'human' animals, is a form/style/tactic that has been appropriated by 'post-colonial/post modern' writers like Salman Rushdie. This tactic enables them to highlight and drive home the various points they make about difference on a multiplicity of levels, alienation, issues concerning immigrants, ways of belonging or not belonging; critical and conceptual spaces are opened up where 'others' can engage in a dialogue with their many selves and with dominant majorities. Namjoshi has a particular fondness for talking animals and birds, and the use of metamorphoses, to drive home her points about difference and tolerance within the complex dialogues and debates that she engages with. As Patricia Duncker puts it:

The narrative argues a coherent politics, even directly addressing particular issues, while changing the terms of the argument. Whether Namjoshi herself thinks that women and men are different species, or that Black and white people are irrevocably separate..... is immaterial. The [narrative] is about difference; told through the traditional medium of fables and fairy-tales, where the beasts can teach us how to be human. <sup>130</sup>

It is true that Cow does appear 'magically' out of the blue. It is also true that Cow's appearance both, disrupts the banality of Suniti's everyday life, and yet, reinforces it through the very ordinariness, or perhaps I should say the humanness of Cow. Thus we get an effective use of defamiliarisation techniques- all

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<sup>130</sup> P. Duncker, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

the characters in the text talk volubly, laugh, cry, fall in love, fall out of love, question, explore, ponder upon the meaning of life; interactions between characters are 'normal', except some of them are cows, and change at will into women, men or Goddesses. This is why it becomes all the more humorous when Suniti says:

'But, of course, B, you are always you whoever you are- if you see what I mean.' What on earth do I mean?..... I decide to do nothing. I shall treat B exactly as though she were B, which she is, who she was, well as she would have been.... (p. 51- 53).

Or furthermore, when Suniti loses her temper with Cow, and makes a rather pointed rejoinder:

'You haven't really been yourself today...'

'But I'm very much myself,' I say in feigned surprise. 'See, same person, same body.' (p. 55).

One also sees in this her Hindu background- Hindu philosophy deems that the world is Maya (illusion), and that life is a journey where truths/knowledges are attained through exploring different aspects of the self. Metamorphosis plays an important part in this process; the Gods and Goddesses often take on human and animal forms in order to teach humans that identity is always fluid and in a constant state of flux, that it is shaped, among other things, by socio-cultural circumstances and the desire of the individual. What makes Namjoshi's work particularly challenging to read, is that she goes beyond any one ideology, and uses these philosophies to map out complex

issues of racism, sexism, gender, sexuality, marginalisation- all in a sophisticated and entertaining way.

We can choose on what terms we want to understand ourselves. We can interrogate our rational and irrational desires. We may be strangers to ourselves, but we need not be our own victims. It is both an existential gesture and an affirmation of political/personal responsibility to undertake the making of ourselves. It makes no sense to dream about who we *really* are, as if there were a perfect doll hidden inside us under layers of seaweed. Our struggle to achieve an identity- and most of us pass through a series of multiple identities, some chosen, others imposed upon us.

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This fits in very well with what Namjoshi is saying through *The Conversations of Cow*. The text is, ultimately, a celebration of the fluidity of identity, and is a life-affirming text. This celebration is not unthinking or unqualified as Namjoshi is very aware of the challenging, often contradictory nature of the discourses and representations she examines fictionally. Suniti refuses to be a victim, either of herself or of racist, sexist ideologies. She refuses to be effaced, she refuses to be assimilated, she is proud of her difference; and ultimately, she comes to terms with her own imperfections, and the imperfections of those she loves, like Cow. She is no longer so harsh on herself and other people- 'But aren't we all an accidental conglomeration of arbitrary particulars, duly supplied with a functioning ego?' (p. 72). Cow's repeated question to Suniti- 'Suniti,' she says, 'what do you want?' Is no

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

longer threatening to Suniti. By the end of the novel- she knows what she is going to do in the immediate future, and that is to write down *The Conversations of Cow*. Thus the text demonstrates a marked engagement with disrupting dominant discourses/ideologies, and creating spaces for interpolated overturnings and rewritings. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty points out:

The writing/speaking of a multiple consciousness, one located at the juncture of contests over the meanings of racism, colonialism, sexualities and class, is thus a crucial context for delineating third world women's engagement with feminisms. <sup>132</sup>

Namjoshi's dense and multi-layered text also raises questions of existentialism- and explores in depth, both, the implications of being, and doing. Issues of community and solidarity and their implications for minority groups (in terms of political acts of agency) are closely examined. But she never loses her light, ironic texture, even when provoking the reader to react critically, examine these fraught issues, and to interrogate his/her own subject positions. We realise after reading *The Conversations of Cow* and Namjoshi's other work, that so much of our ideology, our ways of being and seeing depend on 'othering'.

Suniti is coming to terms with the fact that she does not know all the answers, and might never know them. But she has learnt, through her journeys with Cow, that happiness is hard-

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<sup>132</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Introduction', in *Third World Women and The Politics Of Feminism*, op. cit., p. 36.



won, and usually fleeting, and that life is often just *being*. Earlier, she is confused and scared when asked by Cow to make a wish:

‘But, B, this wish I’m supposed to make, what’s it about?’

‘Oh, you know, who you are and who you’d like to be. What you really want. The sort of thing you’re always mumbling about.’ (pp. 68-69).

But now, ‘the tangible dream’ is no longer frightening. Suniti has searched long and hard, and is, finally, beginning to find ways of belonging without compromising her personal/political integrity.

In the political- marxian sense, alienation is a negative state corrigible through revolutions. But alienation in a philosophic sense (and this is something Spivak develops in her work as she reads “against the grain” and, in doing so, submits the project of alienation-remediation, in the political sense, to interrogation by poststructuralist readings of alienation in a philosophical sense, i.e., alienation as incorrigible), when understood deconstructively, admits of no final correction. <sup>133</sup>

But here, alienation is shown to be corrigible. Through their conversations, Suniti and Cow have opened up spaces which enable ‘imagined communities’<sup>134</sup> to articulate a politics of alliance and resistance. They have found, as Bhabha contends so powerfully:

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<sup>133</sup> R. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.* p. 759.

<sup>134</sup> C. T. Mohanty, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

a form of living that is more complex than 'community'; more symbolic than 'society'; more connotative than 'country'; less patriotic than *patrie* ; more rhetorical than the reason of state; more mythological than ideology; less homogeneous than hegemony; less centred than the citizen; more collective than 'the subject'; more psychic than civility; more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications-gender, race or class- than can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring of social antagonism. 135

Namjoshi's examination of Indian lesbian-feminist subjectivities and selves means that new space, new images, new language, new creativity can emerge. The projection of a postcolonial hybridity combined with lesbian sexuality onto and into the text allows for new resonances and symbols, as well as providing for new relationships between one's selves, between women and between minorities. Thus Namjoshi's writing moves away from isolation and moves towards formulating a concept of community; it effectively thematises and validates marginalised or resistant feminist/lesbian/migrant/postcolonial selves and identities. In effect, Namjoshi makes possible, and affirms, new ways of belonging. As C. Dunsford and S. Hawthorne say:

The journeys, of course, are not all outward. The most difficult and intense ones are undertaken within, from trying to find and face those fickle and elusive creatures, our selves. Somewhere along these journeys, 'the power of our own passion [will] burst through like an exploding frangipani,

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<sup>135</sup> H. Bhabha, 'DissemiNation', *op. cit.*, p. 292.

defying the forces that have attempted to suppress our  
energy.’ <sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> C. Dunsford and S. Hawthorne, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

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